



The HostNation guide to refugee befriending



“There’s someone here who cares about me.”
Meeting Chloe made Shoaib feel welcome.

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SECTION A: BEFRIENDING BASICS

1. Put yourself in the shoes of an asylum seeker

Imagine your world has been upended. You are ...

- fleeing civil war, persecution, trafficking, sexual violence or torture;
- putting your life and savings in the hands of people smugglers;
- walking through a desert without enough food or water;
- crossing the sea in a flimsy dinghy or a dark container.

Finally, you arrive at your dreamt-of destination, the UK. But now you face this...

- the complex bureaucracy of seeking asylum;
- the daily challenges of an unknown culture;
- the struggle to when you are not allowed to work or claim benefits;
- months, even years, of life stuck in limbo as you await an asylum decision;
- the impact of racism and political ill-will.

Suddenly, someone kind holds out their hand to you. You have found a friend.

2. What is refugee befriending?



“I’m a friend who can help Khadim with advice, a reassuring presence.”

Mark, befriender

Befriending is an easy and informal way for you to reach out to someone who needs a warm welcome. A simple walk in the park or a cup of tea can bring a sense of normality to someone whose life has been turned upside down.

We don’t set a format, you choose how and where to meet up, relax and have fun together. We just ask that you meet weekly with your new friend.

Chatting to you can be a real boost for an asylum seeker or refugee, who can practise English, learn about UK culture and get into local life. Many scarcely know anyone outside their social workers, other refugees or their own ethnic community.

Who can befriend?

We accept a wide range of befrienders in our three locations: London, Manchester and Tyneside. You should have excellent English and know your way around your city. You should be culturally open and keen to make a new friend. You should have availability to meet weekly for 2-3 hours.

How does it work?

When refugees and asylum seekers are referred to us, we call them to check they speak reasonable English, to find out their interests and to be sure they're not in crisis.

- 40% of our matches are with asylum seekers who have arrived in the last year or so, are still awaiting a decision and live in Home Office temporary accommodation.
- 60% of our matches are with refugees, who are more settled and may have been here for several years. *(See Appendix for definitions of refugees and asylum seekers.)*

We maintain a database of local volunteers like you. After you fill in our online form, we'll interview you via video call. Successful candidates attend a short online training session (about 2 hours). Then we'll email you when a refugee who fits your profile and location comes up, with a short profile of them.

In selecting a match, we aim to introduce people who live reasonably close to one another, and ideally have some shared professional background or leisure interests (football, cycling, nature, art etc).

If you're both willing, we introduce you via video call or in person. The initial commitment is to meet once a week for three months. Meet-ups are arranged directly between yourselves. We check in after one, two and three months to see how it's going.

3. Your role



"Friendship is the most important thing I have to offer."

Sabrina, befriender

What is expected of you?

Your job is to make your refugee friend feel welcome and relaxed. The best way is to choose activities that you enjoy, and that are free or low cost. This could be a coffee or a walk, a museum trip or a sport.

Rather than the refugee being 'helped', befriending is above all a relationship of equals. However, be prepared to take the initiative about fixing up outings – they don't know their way around like you do and may feel shy, due to language barriers and cultural differences.

Be reliable – they have enough chaos in their lives already and you can provide stability. Lastly, enjoy yourself! Nearly all our befrienders tell us how rewarding they find the experience.

A gentle ask: communicating with our team is part of your befriender role. Please be responsive when we contact you with invitations or for feedback; we are a small team and chasing people takes time.

What is not expected of you?

We do not expect you to solve complex bureaucratic problems your friend may face, nor to support them financially (although you may offer small contributions such as a coffee or a cinema ticket).

We do not expect you to give your friend a place to stay. For support with issues like these, you can direct them to the refugee support agencies [on our website](#).

4. What happens after three months?

The first three months form the initial commitment we require. After that, it's up to you and your friend whether to keep in touch. The majority of our friendships carry on, but some fade out naturally – either way it is usually a valuable experience. We can help end things gently if needed.

We'll check in at the three-month mark for feedback from both sides. We encourage those whose match has gone well to continue. Our formal role ends there, but we're always here for advice. (See also *Section B:6 below*)



"It's been one of the most positive and enriching experiences of my life. Can't recommend it enough!"

Cameron, on being matched with his friend Ahmet (left)

NOTE: We do not accept technically 'vulnerable' asylum seekers or refugees (in need of care or unable to protect themselves). Nevertheless, we are aware that all asylum seekers/refugees may be at risk as a result of the negative circumstances that drove them here. Our befriender training helps address this.

We do our best to set up a good match and guide the first meeting. We're on hand to answer questions step in if needed. We sincerely hope positive relationships will develop, as they overwhelmingly do. However, friendship is a very individual process and we cannot guarantee successful outcomes.

SECTION B: SUPPORT MANUAL FOR BEFRIENDERS

1. Practicalities for meeting up

Make sure your details are saved in your friend's phone. For your first meet-ups, choose somewhere familiar to them or easy to reach by public transport. Most asylum seekers and refugees use buses (cheaper than the tube). Help check routes, confirm details by text, and consider travelling to them if it's easier. A reminder text as you set out is a good idea.

If they are not in receipt of Universal Credit then HostNation can send them a pre-paid Oystercard (London) or a contribution to their initial travel costs. You may also help with fares if you wish, but that's up to your judgement (see 'Paying for things' below).

2. Ideas for things to do

Be prepared to take the initiative. Keep it simple and low-cost. Walk in the park, visit a free museum, market or library, or show them around your neighbourhood. Go for a bike ride. Watch some football.

Shopping: keep costs in mind – show your friend around local charity and pound shops, or how to access donations at a food bank. Find out where they can access free wi-fi and internet. Introduce them to community groups and events. Barbecues, festivals or fairs are great ways to connect. Getting out of the city for a visit to the countryside can be a very welcome break.



You might like to help with practical concerns too – like finding classes, a GP or a college course. Greg and Maggie (left), have helped Ciniaga with all kinds of admin from writing a CV to applying for family reunion.

“When you are surrounded by good people, then good things happen,” says Ciniaga.

Above all, however, befrienders are there to make their friends feel welcome and valued, so balance practical help with fun and friendship.

IMPORTANT: Never post pictures or name your friend on social media without consent.

3. Possible difficulties

Delays and cancellations

Even with the best intentions, plans may fall through. For asylum seekers in particular, life can be unpredictable and stressful, with sudden appointments or housing moves. Contact can sometimes involve several attempts. They may have been moved to another city unexpectedly, or they may simply be too anxious or low in self esteem to focus on making nice plans. Gentle encouragement and patience can make a huge difference. Do contact us if you can't get hold of your friend after repeated efforts.

Relationship sensitivities

If you are a woman matched to a male refugee, bear in mind that his cultural norms around gender may be different from yours. He may not have had a female friend before outside of his family circle, and could feel unsure how to interact. We do make it clear that befriending is not about dating, and difficulties seldom arise. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, however, please let us know.

If you identify as LGBTQ+, it is important to us to safeguard you against any awkward situation with your friend, who may come from a culturally conservative background. Our policy is to be direct with the refugee before matching, listen to their views and match them accordingly.

What if things don't work out?

With the best will in the world, not all relationships take off. Plans may be made, yet when the time comes, there is a no-show. If this happens once or twice, don't give up. If it happens repeatedly, let us know and we can make enquiries.

If it isn't working out on your side, and you wish to pull out, we can help you to handle detachment. If you can't carry out the weekly commitment for any reason, you must let your friend and/or us know as soon as possible. We hope that you may be prepared to try befriending again in the future.

See also: Communicating and cultural sensitivities

4. Important boundaries

Befriending is about equality and friendship. Your role is to walk alongside, not take over. Your friend is best supported in ways that empower them and encourage independence.

Even with the best intentions, please don't offer housing, regular money, or jobs – these can negatively affect legal cases, benefits, and housing support.

Instead, signpost your friend to refugee support organisations (listed on our [website](#)) that can help with volunteering, jobs, CVs and housing.

If asked to provide a written character reference or to outline your relationship to support an asylum claim, then this should only be done in close consultation with your friend's legal representative. We can provide a formal letter explaining your relationship.

Paying for things

This is a sensitive area. As mentioned above, HostNation may provide travel costs for your friend at the outset, but we only have resources for a one-off contribution.

If you feel able to help with bus fares, a coffee, or a phone top-up, this can help make it easier for your friend to meet up: for someone living on just a few pounds a day, these costs are significant.

However, do avoid big gifts or regular money as this can create pressure or dependency. If you do intend to treat them to a meal or a movie, mention this when making the arrangement, so they are not anxious beforehand.

There is a fine line between offering hospitality and making someone feel indebted. Small gestures – like a card, sharing food, or exchanging little gifts – can be appropriate and special. Your friend may also wish to cook you a meal to share their culture and show appreciation.

Visiting each other at home

Start by meeting in public places. As your relationship develops, inviting someone to your home can be an encouraging step once trust builds. If your friend is settled in their own home and invites you over, try to accept, but most live in difficult or temporary conditions that they may not want to share.

Asking about their story

Don't press for personal stories early on. Many refugees carry trauma and may not want to share. They will have been asked to tell their 'story' many times and it can be a relief to take a break.

Focus on the present and future – hopes, goals, and everyday life. If they choose to open up, listen with care and let them set the pace.

5. Communicating and cultural sensitivities

An opportunity to speak English informally is one of the great benefits of this scheme. We ask that all asylum seekers and refugees referred to us speak enough English for a conversation, but levels vary. Some will be fluent, others just starting out. A smile and simple words go a long way. Translation apps can help – and be fun.

You can also help your friend access free local or online English / ESOL classes. Check the listings on our [website](#). Asylum seekers who have been in the UK at least 6 months can attend ESOL.



“We go together for walks, we go for coffee, we go together to yoga. My English is improving.”

Usman feels uplifted by spending time with Lauren and is less shy now that his English is better.

First meetings

First meetings can feel daunting. Focus on making your friend feel welcome and at ease. Dress respectfully, speak clearly until you judge their level of English, and explain that you're a local who wants to help them get to know the city and community.

Respect differences in values. Discussing them gently can help your friend understand British life, but avoid judgement.

Showing interest and respecting difference

Taking time to learn about your friend's country, history, or traditions can show respect and spark conversation. Differences in food, festivals, and culture are great icebreakers. Be open but avoid assumptions.

When organising a meeting, check whether your friend is comfortable with pets if applicable (especially dogs), and ask about their cultural preferences around alcohol and food.

Don't forget that despite their current circumstances, your friend may be just as well educated as you and have held down a high-level job in their home country.

They may come from a more traditional culture than yours, with different views on gender or family. Approach differences sensitively and without judgment. But don't shy away from gentle discussions as this can help them to understand British values.

6. Managing the three-month stage

Our initial commitment is three months, but the overwhelming majority carry on well beyond that point. It's entirely up to you and your friend.

Some connections last a short while, others naturally turn into long-term friendships. Either is fine, as long as the ending is gently handled – we can help with that if needed.

At the three-month stage, we'll arrange an evaluation call with both sides. We'll encourage you to continue if things are going well, or support you if you'd like to close the match. We hope you may like to be paired again in future. After that, our formal role ends – but we always love hearing updates if your friendship is ongoing. Also, you're both very welcome to our events and we're here if you need advice.



“The best thing about our friendship is cake!”

Merve and Emmanuelle have been firm friends since they met in 2024.

7. Safeguarding

Emergency protocol

If you have URGENT concerns about the safety of your friend, notify the emergency services and then report it to us. If you or your befriender are involved in an accident or incident, call 999.

If you are concerned that your refugee friend is severely depressed, contact their GP or the medical emergency services. Their GP can make a referral to their mental health team (CMHT) who will then assume responsibility.

Our criteria

We only match informed adults who can take responsibility for a friendship. We do not take on befrienders or refugees who are minors, who have issues with substance misuse, or serious mental health problems.

Befrienders are not engaged in the regulated activities that require a DBS check. However, we recognise that asylum seekers and refugees, while not classified as “vulnerable adults,” may be at risk due to past experiences of conflict, trauma, exploitation, or loss. It is essential that they are matched with compassionate and reliable befrienders.

Screening and checks

All befrienders are carefully screened. We require two references, photo ID, and a completed profiling questionnaire, as well as a phone interview.

For refugees and asylum seekers, formal checks are harder to obtain. We have a referral process and ask those who self-refer to provide a reference from an organisation. We share the information we receive with befrienders, with consent from both parties and a shared commitment to confidentiality.

Your role

- You are not a social worker or caseworker.
- Your role is to be a friend and equal, not to manage or “fix” your friend’s situation.
- You are not responsible for keeping them safe, but you must act if you see or hear something worrying. Contact our team using the safeguarding contact details you were given when you were matched.

Supporting your friend

- You may help them find specialist advice (legal, housing, health) using our signposting links.
- If the referral came from a caseworker, we can re-connect you with them if urgent.
- If no support is in place, guide your friend to local drop-ins or advice centres.
- They may ask you to go with them to a Home Office meeting, hospital appointment or a court hearing to provide moral support.

Remember: Your role is to walk alongside, listen, and signpost. If in doubt, contact us.

NOTE: information we hold about you

Profile information and location for both parties are used to make the friendship match. With your permission, we share your mobile no. and email. We do not share or store home addresses with your potential friend before we introduce you. We hold your details on file for one year.

We love to receive photos and stories of your activities. If you are both willing, we really appreciate using examples of friendship stories in our communications, to encourage others to get involved.



Ali's befriender Lois took him to visit the Angel of the North

APPENDIX: Background on the asylum process

We do not expect you to become an expert in this complex area, but you may find some of this information helpful during your befriending relationship.

1. Terminology

ASYLUM SEEKER

- has fled their homeland;
- has arrived here in whichever way possible and submitted an asylum application;
- has the right to stay in the country while awaiting a decision.

REFUGEE

- has had their claim for asylum accepted;
- has proven to the authorities that they would be at risk if returned to their home country and has received humanitarian protection;
- can now remain either long term or indefinitely, can work and claim benefits.

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.

2. The asylum application process

People can ask for asylum at once when they arrive in the UK or later at an asylum office. They'll need a lawyer (usually through legal aid) to help write a statement about their experiences. They'll also have an interview. The Home Office makes the final decision, but many people wait many months or even years, since the backlog of claims is huge. As of mid-2025, 91,000 people were awaiting an initial decision.

To be accepted as a refugee, someone must show they can't go home because they would face serious harm — for their race, religion, nationality, politics, gender, or sexuality. This comes from international law (the UN Refugee Convention). A small number arrive through resettlement schemes, where refugee status is granted straight away.

Support while waiting for a decision

An asylum seeker's housing and financial support are provided by the Home Office. Asylum seekers usually live in NASS (National Asylum Service) accommodation or hostels, receive very little money (between £9-£49 per week) and are not allowed to work. Asylum seekers have access to the NHS, and children aged 5–17 can go to state schools.

As of mid-2025, around 32,000 asylum seekers were still housed in hotels. These are far from luxurious, with two or three strangers crammed together in single rooms, and nowhere to prepare food. All asylum seeker accommodation is temporary and people may find themselves repeatedly moved at short notice.

Support for young people

Unaccompanied children are cared for by social services. They may be fostered, placed in children's homes, or supported in semi-independent housing. They can get help until age 21 (or up to 25 if in full-time education). They have the right to a social worker or advisor and a personal Pathway Plan for their future.

Young asylum seekers may apply to university, but unless they already have refugee status and three years' residence, they are usually treated as overseas students and cannot access student loans. Refugees, however, have the same education rights as UK citizens.

If a claim is accepted

Successful applicants are given permission to stay in the UK (usually for 30 months / five years). They now have refugee status or 'humanitarian protection' and can work, study, and claim benefits like Jobseeker's Allowance, housing support, or Universal Credit. Before their five years run out, they can apply to stay permanently.

Despite the excitement of getting refugee status, the transition can be harsh. Asylum housing and allowances stop 28 days after status is granted. In that short time, refugees must get an e-visa, apply for benefits, and find housing. Housing might be private rentals, supported housing, or local authority

homes — but there is no automatic right to a council flat. Delays often mean eviction, leading to homelessness.

If the claim is refused

If refused, people may have the right to appeal, which must be within 10 days. If the appeal succeeds, refugee status is granted. If not, the case may be challenged again if there was a legal mistake.

When all options run out

If appeals fail, a person may have to leave the UK. They can choose Assisted Voluntary Return or face forced deportation. Some may submit a new claim, but the process is complicated and always needs expert legal advice.

3. Latest asylum figures: in the year to June 2025

- 111,000 people claimed asylum.
- 49,000 of these arrived through 'irregular' routes (e.g. small boats).
- 91,000 people are in the backlog awaiting an initial decision.
- 22,000 people were placed in detention and 9,100 were forcibly deported.

4. Mytbusters about asylum seekers – have the facts at your fingertips

"They're illegal."

Seeking asylum is a legal right.

"They should stay in the first safe country."

Law does not require this. Family links, community and language may bring people to the UK.

"They just want benefits."

Asylum seekers get only £1-6 per day. They would like to work, but most are not allowed.

"The UK takes the most asylum seekers."

The UK ranks 20th in Europe for asylum applications per head of population. Worldwide, 85% of refugees live in developing countries.

"Most claims are fake."

Almost half of all claims are granted, many more on appeal.

"They get housing first."

Asylum seekers are placed in temporary accommodation, not council housing.

"They're a threat to women & children."

There is no evidence that asylum seekers are more likely to commit crimes than the general population. Many are fleeing violence themselves.

5. Links for information on asylum

Refugee Council latest asylum facts

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

Latest asylum statistics from the government

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

Oxford University resettlement briefing

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

6. Useful contacts

Government asylum helplines: www.gov.uk/asylum-helplines

- Asylum helpline (Migrant Help): Freephone 0808 801 0503
- Helpline for children (Refugee Council): Freephone 0808 175 3499 or Whatsapp 07888 866615

Asylum enquiries: Migrant Help, services including housing:

www.migranthelpuk.org/Pages/Category/asylum

Asylum system: righttoremain.org.uk have a useful toolkit for immigration and the asylum system.

See also the signposting on our [website](#) for London, Manchester and Tyneside.



“I feel good, especially when we speak in English and discuss culture. Building this friendship has really helped me engage with the community.” *Abdul, refugee*

“It’s been such a positive experience; he’s truly a lovely person.” *Kaat, befriender*