

2. The policy context

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“I know my culture but I don’t know this country’s culture, laws. Some people want to judge people without contact with them. They say, for instance, ‘the British are racist’. No. Approach them and you can see.”

Annie, volunteer, Whitchurch hospital

The government's interest in and recognition of volunteering has increased markedly in recent years. A number of government departments and policies now emphasise the role and potential of volunteering, especially in relation to social inclusion and integration, and as a route to employment.

In the refugee sector, there is growing awareness that volunteering has much to offer to refugees and people seeking asylum and that they, in turn, have much to contribute. Volunteering has gained further prominence since asylum seekers lost the right to work in 2003.

This section therefore summarises some of the key policies and areas of legislation which affect the involvement of refugees and people seeking asylum as volunteers in the UK.



Volunteer,
Whitchurch hospital,
Cardiff.

2.1 Refugees and asylum seekers: permission to volunteer

The Home Office permits and encourages volunteering by refugees and people seeking asylum. The following is from the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) website (www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk):

“We are keen to see asylum seekers and recognised refugees take an active interest in the welfare of their own communities and the local community by undertaking voluntary activity while they are in the UK. But it must be borne in mind that, in the case of asylum seekers, they may not be given the right to remain here. They should therefore not be led to believe that voluntary activity is regarded as a step towards refugee status being granted.

“The following guidance may be of help when organisations consider offers of voluntary activity from asylum seekers. Care should be taken to ensure that the activity being undertaken by an asylum seeker is genuinely voluntary and does not

amount to employment (see [the Note below](#)). Reimbursement can however be made for meal, travel or other costs actually incurred, but not as a flat-rate allowance.”

Note on Employment: “There is a difference between volunteering and employment, which in general remains forbidden to asylum seekers even where the employment is unpaid. An example of unpaid employment would be an arrangement in which a person makes an arrangement to help out in a business, perhaps on behalf of a relative, in return for some non-monetary benefit. But where the work is unpaid and is carried out on behalf of a charity, voluntary organisation or body that raises funds for either, or in the public sector then it will be accepted for immigration law purposes as volunteering.”

For more information, visit:
Immigration and Nationality Directorate:
www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk

2.2 Community cohesion

The government and other agencies have identified community cohesion as crucial to promoting greater knowledge, respect and contact between various cultures and to establish a greater sense of citizenship. The development of community cohesion is defined as the attempt to build communities with four key characteristics:

- a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities
 - the valuing of diversity
 - similar life opportunities for all
 - strong and positive relationships being developed between people from different backgrounds and circumstances in the workplace, in the school and within neighbourhoods
- (Home Office and ODPM, 2005)

Volunteering is seen as one of the routes through which community cohesion can be built. This is emphasised in a number of publications, including 'Community Cohesion: seven steps' (Home Office and ODPM, 2005) and 'Guidance on Community Cohesion' (LGA, 2002). This latter publication specifically states that volunteering by refugees and people seeking asylum is to be encouraged.

For more information, visit:

Commission for Racial Equality: www.cre.gov.uk
 Race, Equality, Faith and Cohesion Unit (Home Office): <http://communities.homeoffice.gov.uk>

Case study example: See [School governors, Section 4.8, page 72](#).

2.3 Employment

In 2005, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) published a refugee employment strategy, 'Working to Rebuild Lives' (DWP, 2005a). This emphasises the importance of a wide range of approaches and partnerships to help refugees into work, including the involvement of volunteering organisations.

DWP's five year strategy for 2005 – 2010, 'Opportunity and Security Throughout Life', also refers to partnership working on refugee issues (DWP, 2005b). DWP supports volunteering among the wider population overall, as well as refugees:

"The aim is to increase the number of people who can participate in voluntary community based activity."

(DWP, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Circular, HB/CTB A36/2001)

To support the DWP strategy, Jobcentre Plus has produced a framework for partnership working to help refugees fulfil their potential (Jobcentre Plus, undated). Titled 'Working together to help rebuild lives', the framework emphasises that DWP 'embraces diversity and, under the Race Equality Scheme, is committed to equal opportunities'. Partnership working is again seen as key to enabling refugees to take advantage of the advice, employment support and opportunities that are available:

"Government, the voluntary sector, employers and professional bodies all have a key role in working together to find solutions to improve access to appropriate employment for refugees."

Like other claimants, refugees who are in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance can do as much volunteering as they like, as long as they remain available for and are actively seeking work. Volunteers in receipt of benefits should declare their voluntary activity.

For more information and copies of strategies, visit:

Department for Work and Pensions:
www.dwp.gov.uk
 Jobcentre Plus: www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk

Case study example: Volunteer Centre Westminster Refugee Project ([Box, Section 4.9, page 80](#)) is working with local Jobcentre Plus offices.

2.4 Diversity

'Diversity' has become a term used by organisations working to ensure they welcome people from different backgrounds. It may be built in to volunteering and other organisational strategies.

Volunteering England defines diversity as follows:

"A diverse organisation is one which values difference. It is one which recognises that people with different backgrounds, skills, attitudes and experiences bring fresh ideas and perceptions. Diverse organisations encourage and harness these differences to make their services relevant and approachable. A diverse organisation draws upon the widest possible range of views and experiences, so it can listen to, and meet, the changing needs of its users, staff, volunteers, partners and supporters."
(www.volunteeringengland.org)

For more information: visit the diversity pages of the Volunteering England website: www.volunteering.org.uk/managingvolunteers/diversity/

Two reports published by Wales Council for Voluntary Action are also useful: *Thinking about Diversity and Equality* (May, 2005) and *Valuing Volunteers: the value of volunteering for refugees and asylum seekers* (Dooner, 2005).

Case study examples: See [BTCV, Section 4.2 page 47](#), and [Oxfam, Section 4.6, page 64](#). The [Volunteer Centre Westminster](#) has a Diversity Group ([Section 4.9, page 78](#)). The following have responded to growing diversity among their client groups: [Maryhill CAB \(Section 4.4, page 57\)](#), [Nomad \(Section 4.5, page 61\)](#), [Rosemount \(Section 4.7, page 68\)](#), [School governors \(Section 4.8, page 72\)](#).

Building diversity at BTCV

In 2001, BTCV secured funding from the Community Fund for 'Environments for All', an initiative that aimed to involve a wider range of people in environmental volunteering, including people seeking asylum and refugees. Funding ended in 2004, and the organisation is now focussing on 'mainstreaming' diversity – embedding it across the organisation.

"There is a danger that organisations use a single project to show their organisation has changed," said BTCV's Chief Executive Tom Flood. "And if you allow outputs to be the pattern, the learning doesn't deepen to the institutional process. This is the second part of the challenge – mainstreaming – not just having a few dedicated projects."

This change has been enabled by a number of factors, including:

- top-level dedication to diversity: organisational direction
- openness to change embraced by staff at all levels
- an ethos of learning from experience, acceptance that things don't always go right first time
- resourcing through Environments for All funding
- losing fear of embracing diversity: being a confident and experienced organisation
- successes in social cohesion: 'getting on and doing' environmental work

There have also been major challenges:

- staff have had to adapt quickly to working with unfamiliar groups in new ways
- new systems and a database have been put in place to monitor volunteer characteristics to satisfy funding demands
- the three-year funding was only enough to begin to implement change in such a large organisation
- awareness of the risk of 'tokenism' and the suspicions this can arouse
- change takes time, especially to have an impact further up the organisational hierarchy
- the exposure and risk of failure attached to trailblazing

"One of my biggest concerns is that our overall impact could be negative, by going in and only just beginning to be able to do work," said Tom Flood. "We're not running projects for the sake of it – it's about embedding the approach."

2.5 Integration

There is a growing literature seeking to define integration. Refugee agencies tend to advocate the approach outlined by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE): that integration is a dynamic two-way process which begins from the day an asylum seeker arrives within the new host society:

“We consider it a continuous long-term process enabling refugees and their communities to live in harmony with the host population of which they form a part. Refugee integration therefore places demands on both receiving societies and on the individuals and communities concerned.” (ECRE, 2005)

Home Office integration strategy for refugees

In the UK, the government has determined that integration begins only once a person has been granted permission to remain in the UK. It therefore excludes people seeking asylum.

In 2005, the Home Office published ‘Integration Matters: A National Strategy for Refugee Integration’ (Home Office, 2005a). This aims to enable refugees to achieve their full potential, to contribute to the community and gain access to public services.

The strategy acknowledges the role volunteering can play, and calls on regional consortia to include volunteering in their integration strategies. The Home Office will evaluate integration – one of the indicators is ‘the number of refugees involved in voluntary work’.

‘Integration Matters’ also states that the Home Office will help develop the capacity of organisations to provide volunteering opportunities for refugees through the development of a volunteering strategy.

As part of the strategy, the Home Office has set up ‘Sunrise’, a pilot programme offering support to people newly-granted refugee status, which includes advice on volunteering.

Scottish Refugee Integration Forum

The Scottish Refugee Integration Forum published a Draft Action Plan in 2003 (SRIF, 2003). This takes a broader approach, allowing for the integration of asylum seekers as well as refugees. The Action Plan makes only one direct reference to volunteering. However, the following two actions

from the Community Preparation Section are relevant:

Key actions: Community preparation

14. Public and voluntary sector organisations and local networks should undertake proactive work to stimulate and support a range of types of activities to promote integration in the local community.
15. Partnerships... should take a strategic approach to supporting front line staff and volunteers from the start of the process of preparation for integration. (SRIF, 2003)

A progress report was published in 2005, which listed a number of ways in which volunteering had been developed as part of the integration action plan (SRIF, 2005).

Wales and Northern Ireland

The Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Government plan to publish draft or final integration strategies in 2007.

“The ethos of integration is central to our work, with local people, with asylum seekers and with foreign students.”

Fiona Forsyth, Project Manager, Rosemount Lifelong Learning

For more information and copies of publications, visit:

European Council on Refugees and Exiles:
www.ecre.org

National Refugee Integration Forum:
www.nrif.org.uk

Scottish Refugee Integration Forum:
www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Equality/Refugees-asylum/integration

Case study examples: a number of the case study organisations had the promotion of integration as their aim. These include Westminster Volunteer Centre (Section 4.9, page 78), and two intermediary organisations: Displaced People in Action and The Parade ESOL Service (Section 4.10, pages 84 and 85). Maryhill CAB is funded by the Scottish Refugee Integration Forum (Section 4.4, page 58).

2.6 National volunteering compacts and strategies

England

The Volunteering Compact sets out principles and undertakings for both government and the voluntary and community sector in England on how to work together to support and promote volunteering (Home Office, 2005b).

In the Compact, government and the voluntary and community sector agree to tackle discrimination, to ensure that volunteering is open to all and that arrangements made for volunteers do not unfairly exclude particular groups from volunteering.

The Compact lists a number of commitments that have particular relevance to the involvement of refugees and people seeking asylum. These include the following for government:

- to work to actively reduce barriers to volunteering resulting from existing legislation, regulation and policies;
- to recognise that it is legitimate for voluntary and community organisations to include the costs of enabling greater access to volunteering in relevant applications for funding.

Voluntary and community sector commitments include:

- to promote volunteering opportunities including looking at how volunteers are recruited to ensure equal opportunities to volunteer;
- to include reasonable costs for reducing barriers to volunteering in relevant funding bids.

For more information and copies of the Compact, visit:

Compact: www.thecompact.org.uk
 Volunteering England:
www.volunteeringengland.org.uk

Northern Ireland

The importance of volunteering is stated in 'Building real partnership', the compact between government and the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland, published by the Department of Health and Social Security, 1998. The compact 'recognises and values highly volunteering as an important expression of citizenship'.

Shared values include:

- Active citizenship: participation of people in society through volunteering, community involvement, and self help initiatives.

- Equality: equality of opportunity in relation to employment and services, and equality of access to resources and decision-making processes for all the people of Northern Ireland.
- Pluralism: upholding the rich diversity of cultures, identities and interests within Northern Ireland.
- Social justice: cherishing all citizens equally, through the pursuit of fairness, tolerance and social cohesion, opposing all forms of discrimination and ensuring the participation of those who are most marginalised.

A Volunteering Strategy is due to be published in 2007.

For a copy of the compact, visit:

Department for Social Development:
www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/publications/voluntary_and_community_development.htm

Scotland

The Scottish Executive published its Volunteering Strategy in 2004. This sets out a number of aims, and emphasises the importance of overcoming barriers to volunteering that certain sectors of society face. The strategy lists a number of values, including:

- Inclusiveness – everyone should be free to volunteer and have the opportunity to do so.
- Diversity – everyone in society has some passion, skill or talent that can be used to enrich someone else's life as well as their own.
- Free will and choice – volunteering is an act of free choice: there must be no form of compulsion or coercion.
- Empowerment – volunteering can empower people to fulfil their potential and acquire new skills and knowledge.

For more information and a copy of the Volunteering Strategy, visit:

Scottish Executive:
www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications

Wales

The National Assembly for Wales published the 'Voluntary Sector Scheme' in 2000. This sets out the broad principles and shared values which govern the relationship between the Assembly and the voluntary sector in Wales, and includes the Assembly's policy on volunteering.



Volunteer, Rosemount
Lifelong Learning,
Glasgow.

The policy includes commitments to improving access to volunteering for people from all sectors of society and encouraging the more effective involvement of volunteers. It states that:

- Everyone has a right to participate in the life of their community and society in general through volunteering.
- Volunteering should be available to all people in society and special measures should be taken to include those who are vulnerable to social exclusion.

- Assembly funding and grants schemes should require organisations to demonstrate an effective policy for involving volunteers from a cross section of society which is appropriate to the nature of the organisation.
- organisations should make proper provision to recruit volunteers from groups vulnerable to social exclusion.

For more information and a copy of the Voluntary Sector Scheme, visit:

National Assembly for Wales: www.wales.gov.uk

Welsh Council for Voluntary Action:

www.wcva.org.uk



Volunteers,
Conservation Volunteers
Northern Ireland.

2.7 Race relations legislation

Under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, public authorities have a duty to tackle racial discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and promote good relations between people from different racial groups. The promotion of good relations is central to the work that local authorities do on community cohesion, and therefore has a particularly strong connection with volunteering.

Because of their connections to the local community, and their ability to stimulate and support community participation, voluntary and community organisations have a crucial role to play in helping public authorities to promote good race relations.

For more information, visit:

Commission for Racial Equality: www.cre.gov.uk

Case study example: See [School governors, Section 4.8, page 76](#), including the volunteer's story. One school successfully encouraged involvement to overcome racial tensions.