

Hosts Handbook

This handbook is to help you through the hosting process and we send it out to all our assessed hosts. It expands and confirms what you will have already heard from your Home Visitor and is a 'work in progress'. We've written it based on the many discussions we have had with hosts and home visitors about the hosting process and it will never be complete. If you have a question you can't find the answer to or have an observation you'd like to share with us and with other hosts, PLEASE get in touch.

Background

Refugees at Home began operating in its current form early in 2016. The model is a simple one – matching hosts who have a spare room with asylum seekers and refugees in need of emergency and temporary accommodation. We continue to keep our processes as simple and immediate as possible so that we can respond quickly to those in need. By early 2018 we had arranged over 60,000 placement nights up and down the country and, bar a few relatively minor issues, this has been largely trouble-free. We operate through a database and an inbox, almost everyone involved is a volunteer and we have few running costs. By the autumn of 2017 we realised we needed full-time input into the placement process and appointed our first two employees. The work of Refugees at Home is supported by an admin team and a Board (details of the Board members can be found on the website). All of our procedures and policies are scrutinised by our pro bono lawyers, Travers Smith. We are hoping that by Spring 2018, our application for full charitable status will be approved.

Who is Refugees at Home?

Refugees at Home is a community comprising our guests, our hosts, the home visitors who support them, our admin team and our support teams (IT, media, fund-raising, governance etc). We work closely with our referrers and actively build links with other organisations supporting asylum seekers and refugees.

Guests

Potential guests are referred from 3 sources – from the large established refugee agencies, homeless charities and immigration solicitors, from smaller groups or individuals and a few self-referrals, the latter only of guests with refugee status. Where the referral comes from a source we don't know, we are careful to gather as much information as we can and ask the

referrer to be honest with us about whether the person they are referring is suitable to come and stay in a host's home. With self-referrals, we ask for 2 references and will speak to at least one of them over the phone. We only take self-referrals from refugees with some command of English. We will always send you all the information we have about a guest when we ask you to consider them and will often enable you to talk to their referrer yourself if you would like to do so. If a guest has been hosted by R@H previously, we will connect you with a previous host so you can ask about the practicalities of hosting this particular person.

We ask about the potential guest's circumstances and specifically whether they have any mental health problems or substance misuse issues or if they have any convictions. We ask the referrer to be thoughtful about whether this is the sort of person who can be hosted and will explain that we cannot help if we have any serious worries about them. We ask that there is a clear plan for taking the next step, whatever that might be (eg gaining refugee status, move-on etc), and that the guest has the sort of support they need to take that step. For example, we will host refugees who are students attending full time courses for up to a term but expect them to get advice from their university about taking out a student loan or getting a job, as any other student would expect to do, to enable them to find their own accommodation.

There is no formal upper time-limit for the duration of hosting, although we are very reluctant to host for longer than a year except in very unusual circumstances. We rely on the honesty of our referrers when discussing length of placements, as for so much other information, and many referrers are people we have worked with on previous occasions. But things change and an expected length of placement from the referrer is not a rigid commitment.

Guests are at different stages of the immigration process. We do not give advice to guests about how to sort out immigration issues and all referrals who do not yet have refugee status must have a case worker before we accept them for hosting. You must also be careful not to give immigration advice to your guests as this is a complex area and it is illegal to offer this sort of advice unless you have recognised qualifications. It can also be very confusing to your guest to have advice from different sources which may seem to be conflicting.

A simple overview of common immigration situations we encounter – for your information:

When people first arrive in the UK fleeing war or persecution, they must claim asylum with the Home Office – people who have done this but have not had a decision about their claim are **asylum seekers**. Asylum seekers who have no other form of support are provided with accommodation (National Asylum Support Service - NASS or “Section 4”) and a small weekly subsistence budget of about £5 per day. We do not generally host people who are eligible for NASS unless they have applied for it and are waiting to be offered a residential place. The time it takes for an asylum claim to be decided varies enormously but can take up to a year, or even more. Sometimes hosts feel uneasy about their guest being expected to go from their home to NASS accommodation as much of what is available is not of a very high quality and people are ‘dispersed’, which means they can be sent to anywhere in the UK, regardless of their support networks and preferences. We do not encourage hosts to offer the guest to stay with them – partly because we have many guests who do not have any other options and partly because it can be hard to get NASS allocated if it has previously been turned down. Guests usually find that their weekly allowance is also stopped if they turn down NASS accommodation, although some have successfully applied for the money grant only.

Once an asylum seeker is granted refugee status they are (according to the Home Office) **refugees**. 28 days after they receive this notification, they are required to move from their NASS place and lose their weekly allowance, regardless of whether their National Insurance Number has been received (this usually takes 21 days and cannot be applied for until refugee status is attained). This means that many of those recently granted refugee status are unable to work, claim benefits or find a place to stay. The Refugee Council estimates that 80% of recent refugees may be in this position. People caught by this 28-day rule are a significant proportion of our guest referrals.

When an asylum seeker’s claim is **refused** by the Home Office, there is a process of appeal against this decision but many in this position are evicted from their NASS accommodation immediately and certainly before they can appeal. We do host some people who are refused at this point but appealing and may also support those who are making a **renewed application** for asylum – this is essentially a new claim and requires fresh evidence, so people may find themselves without support for some months or even longer. Once a

renewed claim has been submitted to the Home Office, asylum seekers should, once again, be eligible for NASS accommodation.

We only accept referrals of those who are actively engaged with the asylum process.

Hosts

Our hosts are people with space in their homes and a willingness to open their door to an asylum seeker or refugee in need. Some hosts have a sofa bed and can offer emergency hosting only, others have a spare room (and sometimes two) and are able to host for longer periods. Some provide a bed and share their bathroom and kitchen. Others cook meals and some get involved in sorting out paperwork, liaising with lawyers and in negotiating the benefits, employment and housing systems. All that we expect is a bed, access to the kitchen and bathroom and a welcoming smile.

All our hosts have a home assessment – even the households of our founder members! It is rare for a home visitor to recommend that we don't accept a host but sometimes, during the visit, it becomes clear that hosting is not going to work for this family for a variety of reasons – someone in the household is anxious, the reality of clearing out those boxes from the spare room is recognised as a problem, the family realise that they had not appreciated the impact a guest might have on their lives. We have also learned that it is not likely that a refugee or asylum seeker will be happy in a remote rural location, however picturesque, because there are no buses or links to refugee support services.

Home Visitors

Our Home Visitors are volunteers who have professional experience which means that they are able to assess people in their homes: for example, social workers, health visitors, district nurses, mental health practitioners or General Practitioners. We ask for details of their professional background, whether they have done home assessments before or worked with refugees or asylum seekers to ensure they are aware of what is needed to support asylum seekers or refugees.

Admin Team

The admin team is primarily made up of volunteers who support our two employees. Everyone is carefully vetted, references are taken up, they are asked to sign a confidentiality agreement and then trained to use our database and to understand our procedures and

policies. We all work remotely and keep in touch using email and WhatsApp groups. There are two teams but many of us work in both teams: the assessment team deals with host and home visitor applications and manages the home visits, while the placement team looks at all the referrals and organises placements. Most people communicate with us through email and we enter all details into the database. This is what allows us to respond to requests quickly and is the core of how we work. You may get emails from different members of the team, depending on who is available. We do ask that if we ask you about your availability, you reply as soon as you can, even if it's a NO. Also please do tell us if your guest leaves the placement, and if possible, where they have gone and when.

Support Teams

We have an IT team who help us run the database and email system and then Board members take on responsibility for social media, dealing with the media more generally, volunteers, fundraising and new initiatives.

What happens when a host applies to join Refugees at Home?

When we receive a host application we allocate a Home Visitor who lives near to the host's home and they make contact and arrange a time to meet with the household to discuss hosting. We ask the Home Visitor to complete an assessment form and to explain how hosting works, answering any questions. Sometimes hosts ask questions which the Home Visitor can't answer and they will refer these back to the admin team. Sometimes people apply to host and then have second thoughts about it all. This is quite usual and the concerns and worries hosts have at this point can usually be addressed during the home visit. We don't want to stress hosts or place guests with families who are uncertain, so we will never pressurise you about going forward with hosting – we can often reassure people and it's always better to voice questions. For a small number of hosts, the home visit is the point at which the decision is taken NOT to host.

The Home Visitor will ask to meet and talk to everyone in the household because it's really important that everyone is happy with the plan.

What happens after your home visit?

Once your Home Visitor has been to see you, they will take up at least one of your references and then prepare and send a report to us about your household explaining to us any preferences you have told them about. Your report is then entered into our database and the crucial details highlighted – like the fact that you have a pet or can only offer an emergency place. We then send you a letter confirming that you have been accepted as a host and that we will be in touch when we have a possible guest to ask you about.

If you live in London or one of our other busy cities, we may get in touch with you shortly after this. If it's too soon, just tell us and we'll leave it for a little while before asking you again. We operate on the 'if we don't ask nothing happens' basis but you can always say 'no' if it's not the right time!

Requests for hosting

Once we have decided that someone is suitable to be hosted and that we have a reasonable chance of being able to find a host or a series of hosts for the period they expect to need help, we then use the database to try and find a suitable placement for them. From what we know of the guest and possible hosts, we try to find a match. In areas like London, we are often not able to meet the guest's location preferences and may need to look at hosts in a different area, even outside the city.

We then send a request out to a host or a number of hosts (depending on the level of urgency), giving the potential hosts all of the information about the guest and asking for their views. We may ask the host if they would like to talk to the referrer or to a previous host if there is one. Some hosts will ask us to find the answers to specific questions. If you are asked about a possible guest, please do not feel under pressure to accept them if you are not sure. It's much better to say a clear 'no' if this is your view so we can look elsewhere. What is really helpful is a quick response, in principle, either way so we can either move forward with the placement or ask someone else.

Some hosts are able to make a decision about hosting based on the information we send them. Others may want time to think it through, to talk to people and even to meet the guest before they decide. Sometimes hosts make an offer of a short period of hosting to see how it goes. The host is always in a position to say what will work for them and the placement team will

work round that. Guests are warned that they may not be offered a placement for the full period that they need help but that we will find second and even third hosts for them. Once a guest has been hosted once, their first host can then give them a testimonial with a subsequent host.

If you are hosting for the first time, ask as many questions as you need to and take as much time as you want in order to feel confident. Some hosts may prefer to host a female guest to start with (although that may take time as we have relatively few women needing hosting), some will then be happy to host a male guest, some people want to start with a short period of hosting and may then extend or host for a longer period on subsequent occasions. You can also ask to host someone who is already known to Refugees at Home and then talk to their previous hosts. If you're not happy to host someone we ask you about, SAY NO. We really don't mind when people do this and a clear early answer makes things much clearer.

When we have a host who is happy to make an offer of a place for a specific time, we send an email of introduction to the host and the referrer, copying in the host's home visitor. We include in this all the details which have been negotiated about the placement and all the contact details everyone will need, including a number of one of the R@H team. We ask the referrer to make the detailed arrival arrangements with the host to avoid complicated 3-way conversations but someone will always be available to help if its needed.

Once a placement is made, the guest should be supported by their referrer and the host is supported by their Home Visitor (who will phone or visit in the first few days) and by the placement team at R@H. You can contact us by email or using the phone number we send you.

Before your guest arrives

Even before you are asked to take a guest, you should have decided which room or space will be available to a guest. Many people use their spare room which is also the place many of us store things we don't use very often. Once your guest arrives, they will need to feel they have some privacy so it's a good idea to make sure you have moved anything you are likely to need. Some of our guests only have a small bag but others arrive with suitcases and will appreciate some storage space if possible, especially if it is expected that they will stay for more than a couple of days. It's also a good idea to sort out some bed linen and towels and have those ready.

You will also need to think about house rules. You may feel that your house doesn't have rules but it does! Every household runs in its own way and your guest will not know how you do things. Run through things like daily routine, security, use of the bathroom, shared use of the kitchen, what time the house is quiet for the night, how you feel about your guest returning after that time and a whole range of other issues. You won't anticipate everything and will need to be willing to explain other things when your guest arrives but the more you can think through in advance, the easier it will be for everyone.

One of our guests prepared a short introductory pack to explain how their home worked in a non-verbal way. Let us know if you would like a copy of this.

Arrival

You will have worked out a suitable arrival time with the referrer. These arrangements usually work out well but bear in mind that some of our guests may find the whole process very alarming – they are coming to the home of someone they have never met, know very little about and may be filled with all sorts of anxieties that you may be someone who might reject or exploit them. Refugees have often had very long difficult journeys to the UK and will have had experiences which leave them wary of those they do not know. Sometimes guests panic at the last minute and prefer to stay where they are (even if this is on the streets) rather than face the unknown. Please don't be offended by this. It isn't about you - it is about their anxiety and fear and, with support from their referrer, they will arrive. In some cases, the admin team can support the guests in this period but it's better where the referrer can do this as the guest already knows and trusts them.

The best way to make your guest welcome is to offer tea and something to eat but be prepared for your guest to be uneasy about eating with you. Again, this is not personal – they may find the prospect of eating unfamiliar food, in an unknown setting with people they don't know just too alarming. Lots of smiles, the basic information and the chance to rest and sleep may be what is really needed at that point. Just make sure they know where they should sleep and where the bathroom is – the rest can wait for the next day.

Your guest may then sleep for long periods over several days. This isn't idleness. When people have been sleeping in parks or on the night bus, they can be exhausted and so grateful to be in a clean, safe, quiet place. When they emerge, they may feel much more relaxed and you can begin to introduce them to how your home works. Some things may need to be repeated. If your guest doesn't speak much English you may need to get the referrer to help,

possibly through an interpreter. Google translate can help too. We also have guests who have offered to help with translation. Mime and simple drawings can be a quick way to get over much of this.

We ask you to provide the guest with a safe place to sleep. They also need to be able to eat – this may be at meals with you or by allowing them space to prepare their own food (and remember to think about where they can store food and when it's OK to use the kitchen). You may also notice that people are in need of some very basic supplies – toiletries, clean socks and underwear, a pair of shoes, some gloves in the winter. Not everyone needs this sort of support and some of our guests are ashamed that they are in need, so you will have to be sensitive about how you offer these things if you feel you would like to. Many guests also appreciate a chance to practice English and get to understand our way of life. Just listening to family conversation will help and the radio and TV are invaluable in all sorts of ways.

Some guests speak very little English and downloading Google translate beforehand can be immensely helpful. Most guests will have it on their phones already.

In terms of money your guest may be completely without any income (ie asylum seekers, those making a renewed claim and those who got refugee status long enough ago for the £36 a week to have stopped but before Job Seekers Allowance kicks in), some are able to claim benefits (refugees) and others may be already working (refugees). We will make sure you know what their situation is. Where the guest is placed away from their support structures, we can offer a travel bursary of up to £20 a week to cover some of their additional costs. We will pay this money to you, if you think it is necessary, and will ask you to send your bank details to our Treasurer and, on a monthly basis, confirm the payments are still needed while your guest is staying with you. We do, albeit rarely, also make a bursary payment to a host to cover the additional costs of food for the guest.

Once they are settled, your guest has many challenges to negotiate and we expect referrers to support their client to do this. We do not assume or expect that hosts will get involved in this although many offer help with form filling and more general advice. It is particularly important not to get involved in trying to give advice about immigration.

Guests may need to apply for benefits and should do this through the local job centre as anyone else would. You should not be asked to give information about yourself or your household to the benefits people – you are a host and the guest is not part of your usual household. We can provide a formal letter explaining that this is a hosting arrangement if

this is needed. Your guest may ask if they can use your address in order to get a bank account but unless their stay will be longer than a few months it might be better for them to use their referrer's office as their address. Getting a bank account can be a marathon.

Most refugee guests will also want to look for work and should get some help from their referrer or local refugee support organisation to do this. Speaking some English is a minimum for almost all jobs but some guests may need help to get their qualifications recognised so that they can work in a field where they have experience.

Your guest may already be signed up for English classes – this is something the referrer should help with and there are classes in all areas. Your guest's English will improve the more they are exposed to the language and this will be of great help in finding a job and eventually a place to live.

Guests are able to register with a GP in the area they live in. Whether or not they should move their GP depends on how long you envisage them staying with you.

Guests with particular needs

We do not host people who are acknowledged to be under 18 or who have significant mental health or substance abuse problems. However, some of those we do host may have vulnerabilities and we are careful about asking hosts to take on people with additional needs.

- young guests – these may be people in their late teens but can include people who have been assessed as being 18 or 19 by the Home Office or Social Services but claim that they are younger than this. These young people are 18 according to the authorities and we accept them as such even though their age is disputed. Some of these guests may have lived and travelled without their parents, sometimes for a number of years so they are both naïve and used to being totally independent, with nobody knowing or caring where and when they come and go. Hosts need to respect their autonomy while being very clear about household boundaries. Issues such as the time the household is made secure for the night may need to be explained more than once – it is important that the hosts are able to run their home as they want to and we will always ask the referrers to explain this to the guests.
- Guests who have been traumatised – almost all our guests will have experienced loss and seen/heard about distressing things during their journey. Difficulty in getting to sleep, being wary of unfamiliar experiences and low mood are not uncommon. Some of our

guests have symptoms of PTSD which have been recognised and help offered. All refugees and asylum seekers are entitled to medical care. We will always tell you about any problems the guest is experiencing and will have asked the referrer to set up the necessary support.

- Guests with disability and illness – we ask the referrers to explain about any disabilities or ongoing health problems so that we and our hosts can understand the implications for being hosted.
- Guests with little English – it is unusual for guests to have no English at all but many will be lacking in confidence. We will always ask the referrer if the guest has a friend who can help with translation and we also have some volunteers who have offered to help. If all else fails, Google translate can be used along with miming and lots of smiles.
- pregnant guests and those with small babies – some of our guests are pregnant or have recently given birth. The critical issue is to ensure this group of guests are not left in dangerous situations but we also try hard to ensure that we offer longer-term placements to these women if this is at all possible. We are lucky to have hosts who have experience of helping women in this situation and will always try to arrange hosting with them.

Refugees and asylum seekers are, by definition, vulnerable. That doesn't mean they aren't articulate, intelligent, determined human beings with personal agency; but they are also in a complicated legal and personal situation, often having endured difficult circumstances that has left them with many complex things to work through; and all this in an alien country and culture. As a host, you need to be highly aware of the power differential and consider how this might affect your relationship with the guest. Particular care should be taken about developing any relationship beyond that of host and guest and to think through what consent might mean to the guest. This is particularly important in terms of sexual relationships, but also business relationships, any financial agreements (our advice would be don't sign any while hosting) or even very intense friendships. A host might be making a very genuine offer of help or friendship but the guest may well feel powerless and obliged to agree as a result. If you are uncertain about this, please talk to your home visitor or one of the admin team.

Moving on

The plan for moving on is one which the guest and their referrer should be working on throughout the period of hosting. Some guests will be making an application for a hostel place or hoping to find a private rental. Others will hope to be housed by the local housing department, which can be tricky and long-winded. Generally, only those who are vulnerable will be offered social housing. This can be a source of some confusion as guests may have rather unrealistic expectations about what is possible. Referrers are crucial in terms of helping guests work out a realistic plan for the future.

At the time you agreed to host, we will have discussed how long you would like this period of hosting to last for. This is up to you. Even if the guest is going to need help for longer than you want to offer, we will not expect you to host for longer. Sometimes, hosts suggest a duration of a month or 2 weeks and then review. Even if you feel you would like to offer for longer, we will suggest a review after a month, especially if you are a first-time host, to give you a chance to look at how things are going. Once we have a firm end date, we will work to move the guest by that date and will keep you informed about our progress. We may ask you to provide a brief testimonial for your guest which we can send to the next host and some hosts will ask to talk to you directly. This is really helpful as your 'reference' carries much more weight than anything we or the referrer tells a new potential host. When we have a new host set up, we will send out another email of introduction, giving the new host all of the contact details, including yours so that the plans for the move can be made. It's a good idea to make sure your keys are returned – guests will not go off with them deliberately but things get forgotten at the last minute and it's easier to remind people than to try and retrieve keys later. You may find that your guest will want to keep in touch to give you an update on their progress.

Once your guest has left, we will try not to approach you with another request for at least a couple of weeks. In London, where we are short of hosts, this may not always be possible.

IF WE ASK YOU TO HOST AND IT ISN'T OK, PLEASE JUST TELL US.

What if things go wrong?

If you are uncertain or worried at any point, let us know and we will sort it out.

The vast majority of placements proceed with no problems and minor issues are quickly sorted out by the referrer. However, if you are not feeling comfortable for any reason or if your circumstances change and you need your guest to move, tell us and we will deal with this. Life happens – people get ill, family need to come and stay, things change – if you need your room back, we will find your guest somewhere to stay, and usually quickly.

It also happens that a guest is clearly not coping with being in a household. This is usually because of something outside the hosting arrangement – they get a job which is at a distance, they find they cannot cope with living with people they don't know, they feel isolated from friends or support structures. The referrers may tell us this or you may notice. In this situation we will do all we can to address the issue or ask the referrer to look for alternative accommodation.

Some hosting arrangements come under strain because the guest is not sticking to the household 'rules' or conventions. Where this happens, it is up to the guest to adjust to the household not the other way around and we ask the referrer to help with this. Such issues may arise when cultural expectations are an issue – for example, young guests may have had no experience of the idea that they should change their bed linen at regular intervals having previously been supported by their family. For some guests, these are problems which resolve with a bit of patience and explanation. Where guests can't adjust, we may need to ask the referrer to make other arrangements.

It is extremely unusual for more serious problems to arise. Where there are more difficult challenges, we will intervene and support you immediately, if necessary asking the guest to leave that day. Should the need arise, we would mobilise someone to come and help with that process.

We have prepared a guide to the Prevent procedures (to stop people being drawn into terrorism) which we are required to do as a responsible organisation. It is exceedingly unlikely that you will need to consult it, but it is available in the event that you do. Perhaps even more important is for you to call us about any concerns you may have. Please bear in mind that our guests are people who are fleeing danger and persecution. They are desperate for safety and security and are incredibly grateful for the kindness and generosity our hosts show them.

Personal information and Privacy

Refugees at Home collects and uses personal data about guests, hosts and home visitors. As part of the valuable contribution you make to the work we all do, we will send you information – about potential guests and sometimes about other hosts. As with all personal information you should treat this with care, keeping the details we send you safe and using them only to support the placement. When you no longer need the details, please delete them from your computer. Please be especially careful with any details which you print out – these must be disposed of with care. Taking care of personal data is part of our shared responsibility under the new data protection regulation.

We will not generally use personal details in the media and social media and certainly not without the full and informed consent of the people involved. We will always ask hosts, guests and volunteers before we put the media in touch or give contact details. When we use social media or make appeals for hosts, we will not use names or identifying data about hosts or guests but we may use first initials. Please be very careful about posting information or photos of your guest on social media. Some guests are extremely frightened that information will get into the hands of those who mean them, their families or communities harm. Others are uneasy about people knowing about their lives for other reasons. We have a communications policy available.

Policies

Our website has links to the Prevent policy along with our Complaints, Privacy and Media policies. If you feel we have missed anything from these procedures we would be pleased to hear from you.

Support for hosts and Home Visitors from R@H

Your Home Visitor is someone who will keep in touch with you and we will let them know when you are asked to host. You will be given a mobile number of one of the admin team and encouraged to contact us by email at info@refugeesathome.org if you have any concerns or questions.

We also send out a quarterly newsletter. Back copies can be found at

www.refugeesathome.org

We have a database of resources which you may want to look at or direct your guest to. It can be found at:

<http://refsource.gebnet.co.uk/>

London hosts can also find help and advice on the Refugees At Home London page:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/210107659529883/>

We hope to start more of these local pages – maybe for the North West and South Wales – in the near future.

Hubs

We currently have hubs in London and some of the other large cities and would like to develop this further. Hubs can provide a further point of contact between hosts and home visitors but also an opportunity to share ideas and experience with others members of the Refugees at Home community in the local area.

THANK YOU

Thank you so much for supporting Refugees at Home as a host. Without you we could not offer support to those in need. Many of you having busy working and family lives and give up your time and space in your homes to support the work we do – we are very grateful.

If your circumstances change and you are unable to continue to be a host, please let us know. Even if you are no longer able to host, we hope you will continue to be part of the Refugees at Home community – you can support us by telling people you know about hosting and this may encourage them to become involved too.