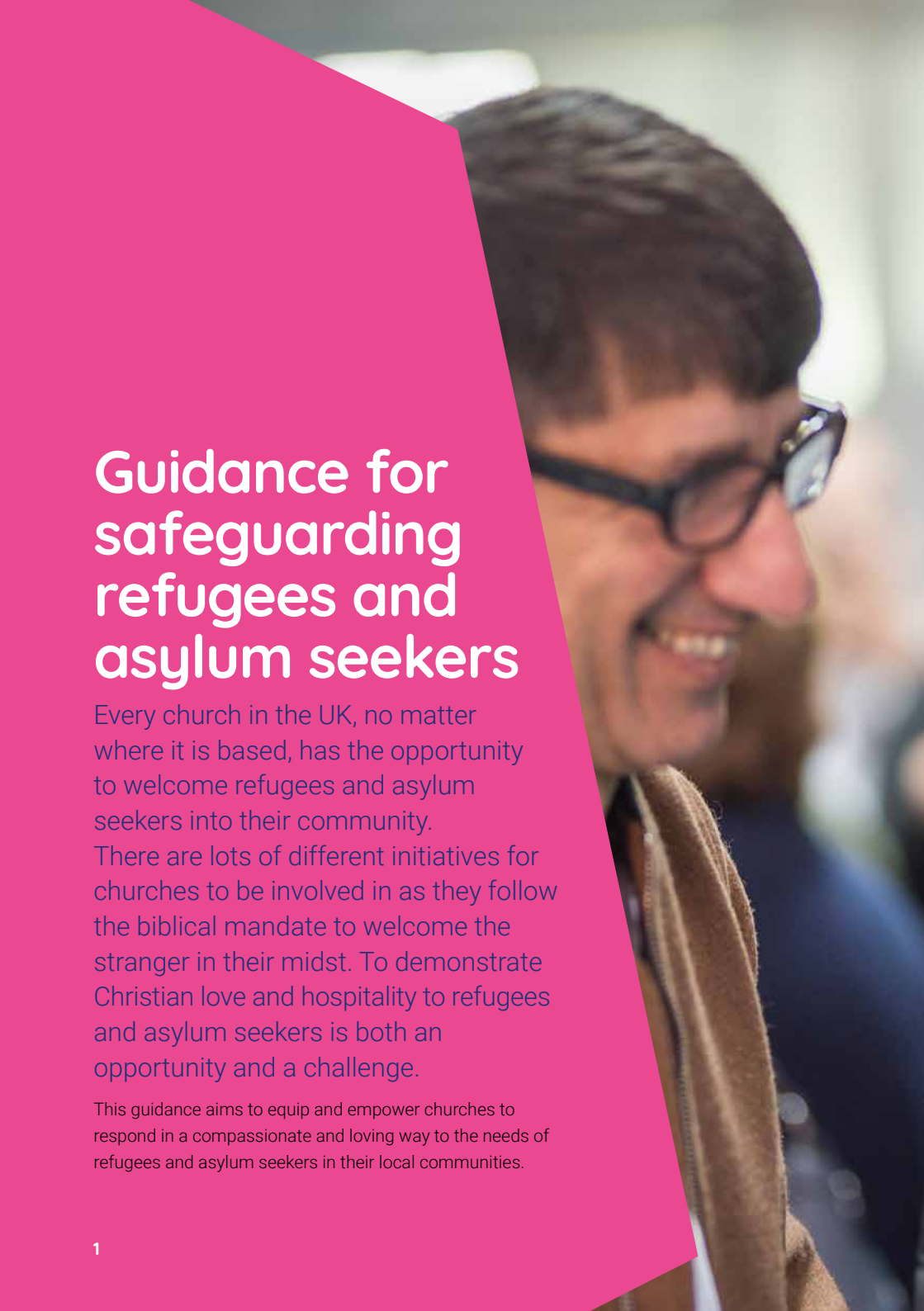


# Guidelines for safeguarding refugees and asylum seekers





# Guidance for safeguarding refugees and asylum seekers

Every church in the UK, no matter where it is based, has the opportunity to welcome refugees and asylum seekers into their community.

There are lots of different initiatives for churches to be involved in as they follow the biblical mandate to welcome the stranger in their midst. To demonstrate Christian love and hospitality to refugees and asylum seekers is both an opportunity and a challenge.

This guidance aims to equip and empower churches to respond in a compassionate and loving way to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers in their local communities.



# What is a refugee?

The UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees definition:

**“Any person who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”**

By definition, refugees are likely to have suffered torture, or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Refugees and asylum seekers may have reported such areas of abuse on their asylum claim.

## Refugee:

In the UK, the term 'refugee' is used in a slightly different way to the UNHCR definition. In the UK, the term 'refugee' is used to describe a person who has had their claim for asylum approved by the UK Home Office. They are permitted to live and work in the UK, subject to the length of visa they have been given.

## Asylum Seeker:

In the UK, an asylum seeker is someone who has claimed asylum upon arrival in the UK, and is still awaiting approval (or rejection) of their asylum claim by the UK Home Office. They are usually supported through the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) and are not generally allowed to work or claim benefits in the UK.

### What do I need to know?

1

**Safeguarding considerations** Refugees and asylum seekers have the same fundamental rights to safety and protection as any other person and the fact that their citizenship status may not have been resolved does not alter this.

2

**Church Responsibilities** All churches working with refugees and asylum seekers need to be alert to their safeguarding responsibilities in undertaking this work.

3

**Get help and support** These guidelines have been jointly produced by thirtyone:eight and Welcome Churches and they are intended to help churches working with refugees and asylum seekers.



## Safeguarding considerations

Refugees and asylum seekers have the same fundamental rights to safety and protection as any other person and the fact that their citizenship status may not have been resolved does not alter this.

Although safeguarding principles remain the same for all vulnerable groups, the way that these principles are applied to refugees and asylum seekers may be different, depending on the particular context of the individual or family concerned.

From a safeguarding point of view, refugees and asylum seekers are not necessarily vulnerable and their autonomy should be respected. They are, after all they have gone through, survivors and shouldn't be treated as victims.

However, refugees and asylum seekers may face certain risks associated with their particular experiences and circumstances. For safeguarding to be effective at the local level there needs to be good communication and sharing of expertise and specialist knowledge between church volunteers and local sources of advice and support for those working with these groups.

Here are some of the particular issues that churches and organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers should be aware of:

- **Experience of trauma**

Some refugees and asylum seekers have experienced extreme trauma prior to their arrival in the UK, either in their country of origin (linked to their reasons for leaving their home country) or during what is often a frightening and dangerous journey. Churches should be prepared to work with people who are likely to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Training should be sought by the church if this is an area for which they feel ill-equipped.

- **Classified as vulnerable**

Refugees coming through a government resettlement programme are likely to have been highlighted as extra 'vulnerable' in order to come to the UK. Priority is given to those who cannot be supported effectively in their region of origin: women and children at risk, people in severe need of medical care and survivors of torture and violence amongst others. It is important to note that even though refugees may have been classified as vulnerable for the purposes of refugee resettlement this does not necessarily mean that they are vulnerable in a safeguarding sense.



- **Unaccompanied children**

Asylum-seeking children who are unaccompanied are in a highly vulnerable situation and there is specific guidance from the government about how they may be protected. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children become the responsibility of children's social care on arrival in the UK. Once they turn 18, if they have not yet been granted asylum, they will be transferred to the general National Asylum Support Service (NASS). This transition can create significant stress on the young person.

- **Disputes over age**

Sometimes there may be a dispute about a young person's age (i.e. whether they are under 18 and therefore legally a child or not) and there are rules about how a young person's age may be determined in the absence of documentation. Young people in this situation may be placed

in unsuitable accommodation (i.e. with other adults they are not related to) and may need help to access legal advice.

- **Mental health**

Asylum seekers can feel stressed and under pressure whilst awaiting on the outcome of their asylum case. This can impact their mental health and the decisions they make day-to-day, adding to their vulnerability. If an asylum case is particularly complicated, individuals can sometimes face destitution if they have no further recourse to public funds.

- **Unaware of expectations**

Newly-arrived refugees and asylum seekers may not be aware of the standards expected of parents in the UK. Examples of this can include leaving children alone at a young age and not using car seats when travelling.



- **Cultural practice**

Refugees may bring beliefs, cultural and religious practices with them from their country of origin that contribute towards abuse. This can include disciplinary practices towards children which may be relatively common in their country of origin, such as physical discipline, that are illegal in the UK. Additionally, there may be deeply held views about family relationships and gender roles which may make abuse more difficult to identify.

- **Unsuitable accommodation**

Situational risks faced by refugees and asylum seekers include being placed in unsuitable accommodation with unrelated individuals from different cultural backgrounds to their own. Women can also be at risk from being seen by single men within their language community as potential partners. Unreported domestic abuse may also be an issue among adults, who may not be aware that the situation they are in (or have been in) would be classed as a form of abuse in the UK.

- **Human trafficking**

The global movement of people in an unstable and highly unequal global environment brings further risks for refugees and asylum seekers. These include people trafficking, modern slavery, forced marriage and radicalisation. Refugees and asylum seekers may also be at a higher risk of female genital mutilation, and other harmful cultural practices.

- **Financial abuse**

For adults, financial abuse can be an issue, particularly if they experience language barriers. For example, when people have English as a second language, it can be difficult for them to distinguish between important letters that come through the post, and junk mail. Refugees can also be more vulnerable to financial abuse if they disclose financial information to volunteers.



## Church Responsibilities

All churches working with refugees and asylum seekers need to be alert to their safeguarding responsibilities in undertaking this work. Good safeguarding practice requires the following:

- Any work done with refugees and asylum seekers by church workers and volunteers should come under the authority of the church leadership and be subject to the church's safeguarding policy. If church members are working with refugees in an independent capacity, there should be clear boundaries between this work and any projects carried out by the church.
- All safeguarding concerns should be referred to the church safeguarding coordinator who will respond to them in line with the church's safeguarding policy. In situations of doubt where there is uncertainty as to whether the concern is a safeguarding concern or a welfare matter, the church safeguarding coordinator is advised to ring the thirtyone:eight Helpline.
- Churches should consider appointing a Refugees and Asylum Seekers' Coordinator to oversee the work and to liaise with other local support services. This appointment should be made by the local church leadership, in consultation with a specialist refugee agency where appropriate.
- All church workers and volunteers involved in projects for refugees and asylum seekers should be familiar with their church's safeguarding policy and should receive safeguarding training that takes account of the particular vulnerabilities and risks associated with working with refugees and asylum seekers.
- Recruitment of workers and volunteers to work with refugees and asylum seekers should be undertaken in accordance with safer recruitment principles subject, where appropriate, to satisfactory DBS checks.

### Refugees and Asylum Seekers Volunteering

We encourage churches to allow refugees and asylum seekers to volunteer within church projects. For asylum seekers, however, there are a few things that the church should be aware of, before recruiting asylum seekers in a voluntary role:

- Asylum seekers may have difficulty obtaining a DBS check.
- Asylum seekers are not allowed to undertake paid work in the UK.
- Asylum seekers are allowed to volunteer, but they should not carry out work that replaces a work position.



# 3

## Get help and support

These guidelines have been jointly produced by thirtyone:eight and Welcome Churches and they are intended to help churches working with refugees and asylum seekers.



Thirtyone:eight is the UK's only independent Christian charity which helps individuals, organisations, charities, faith and community groups to protect vulnerable people from abuse. To do this, we provide training, consultancy, disclosures and a 24 hour helpline, making sure everyone is equipped and empowered with the tools they need. Trusted for over 40 years, we work together with a network of thousands of member organisations to make sure that standards for safeguarding are upheld and protected.

**0303 003 1111**  
**[thirtyoneeight.org](http://thirtyoneeight.org)**



Welcome Churches' vision is for every refugee to be welcomed by the local church. We provide on-the-ground training, tools, and expertise for churches, equipping them to care practically for refugees and welcome them into their church community. We enable churches to provide frontline services to welcome, support and care for refugees and, through a growing national network of churches, we help refugees find a church that will support their practical and spiritual needs wherever they are moved to.

**01332 498041**  
**[welcomechurches.org](http://welcomechurches.org)**

# Five Essential Questions

1

Does your organisation have a safeguarding policy and appropriate forms?

2

Would everyone know what to do if there was a concern about possible abuse?

3

Are you recruiting workers safely including DBS checks where possible?

4

Are you training and supporting your leaders and children's workers?

5

Do those who attend activities or come to services know what you are doing to keep children and adults safe?

For expert help, easy to follow advice and guidance from the UK's only independent Christian safeguarding charity contact us and find out how membership with us could help you.



Call us 0303 003 1111  
email us [info@thirtyoneeight.org](mailto:info@thirtyoneeight.org)  
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