



# Befriending handbook.



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# 1. What is Friends of Refugees London?

Friends of Refugees London is a charity which aims to welcome and support refugees, asylum-seekers, and vulnerable migrants in London. We do this by providing befriending and advocacy services to help refugees as they settle into their new lives. We are experienced in supporting vulnerable refugees and migrants, and we work closely with a network of refugee organisations around London.

Whether a refugee has just arrived in London from Syria, Afghanistan or Ukraine on a government scheme, arrived here alone and has lived in London for a few years, or has been here with family for many years, the issues and problems they encounter can be very similar - and very difficult to deal with. Poor housing, lack of understanding about rights, ongoing immigration issues, lack of access to healthcare services - these can make life very tough. Some refugees, asylum-seekers and vulnerable migrants can have a lack of English language skills, which locks them out of socialising, getting a job or getting around.

Friends of Refugees London works to reduce loneliness, to help refugees and migrants feel included and independent. Through our befriending scheme, we aim to make refugees feel welcome and part of their community, sharing our time, resources, social activities and networks. Befriending can help a refugee find their feet, give them access to a social network, and empower them to live independently and actively in their communities.

Our ultimate aim is to build inclusive and welcoming communities across London where refugees and other migrants are empowered and valued.

There is more information on FoRL's Trustees, on our experience and history of working with refugees, and of the bigger picture of refugees in Lewisham and beyond on [our website](#) .

## 2. What is befriending?

Befriending is a one-on-one, non-judgemental, relationship between a volunteer and a refugee or migrant (referred to as clients in this document) which is initiated, supported, and monitored by FoRL. It is:

- A **partnership**; a welcoming and supportive relationship based on friendship, respect and equality.
- A place of **trust**, where clients feel safe and supported on their own terms.
- A **support** structure and point of contact, helping people get to know London and everything it has to offer.
- A chance for refugees to practise their English where required, learn more about British culture and traditions, and feel **part of their new community**.
- A **commitment** to an ongoing relationship and regular meetings which will benefit both the befriender and their partner.
- A **personal** relationship, where volunteers see their client as a whole person, rather than by labels like 'refugee' or by their problems.
- A place for **fun** - it cannot be overstated how far a little laughter and enjoyment can go.

Refugees and migrants, especially those newly arriving in London, very often do not know many people who can help, advise and support them - they may not be aware, for example, of the kinds of community or public services on offer, from libraries to public transport. Many have experienced traumatic events, or at the very least, may feel a sense of frustration and sorrow at having to start their lives all over again. There may be cultural differences which can lead to misunderstanding, frustration or exclusion. One-to-one befriending relationships not only help to reduce the social isolation that refugees may experience, but can increase self-confidence, promote independence, broaden social networks and help people to engage with their new lives. A simple walk in the park, a visit to the local market or a chat over a cup of tea with a friendly person can bring a sense of normality to someone whose life has been turned upside down. A friendly supporter accompanying them to an appointment can create real empowerment.

In return, **here's what you can expect from becoming a befriender** with Friends of Refugees London:

- You will be helping to tackle social isolation, and helping refugees and migrants feel more welcome and integrated in London life.
- You will be demonstrating solidarity with people fleeing violence and persecution.
- You will have the chance to really improve an individual refugee's lived experience of London.
- You will receive comprehensive basic training that may include refugee awareness, working with people from different cultures, confidentiality and boundaries, safeguarding and working with interpreters.
- You will have access to ongoing project training and development, regular support and supervision.
- Opportunities for self-reflection and recognition of your time spent as a volunteer with a Certificate of Appreciation. Where appropriate, FoRL will also provide access to a reference letter, depending on duration of volunteering.

### 3. What do befrienders do?

Befriending is a unique, supportive relationship. There is likely to be less common ground than in a normal friendship and there can be a language barrier as well as a wide cultural divide to bridge.

It is also different to a regular friendship, at least initially, because it is an intentional one organised via FoRL rather than something that starts up 'naturally' between two people. Many partnerships go on to become more natural friendships, but equally some don't and that's fine too.

Befrienders give their time, friendship and support. They commit to meeting regularly with their partners to support them in whatever way works best for them, including:

- **Helping with everyday life.** Whether that's help getting to know their local area; navigating the supermarkets and finding out which shops stock international produce; or sourcing second-hand/cheap items for their homes, your knowledge will be invaluable.
- **Building links with the community.** By creating bridges to the neighbourhood and beyond, you are giving your client the chance to participate more fully in their community. Many of our volunteers are well-connected with their local area via faith institutions, parenting groups, hobbies or sports clubs. Including your partner in some of these things can help make them feel welcome and involved in London life.
- **Support with English language.** This can help people to find work, form social bonds and manage their lives. We don't expect you to take on a formal teaching role - but informal conversation with fluent English speakers is a fantastic way to improve skills and build confidence.
- **Taking part in activities and new experiences.** Making plans to get out and about, helping your partner experience new things and places, trying things beyond a regular coffee, can be uplifting and energising for both of you.

You may also opt to have additional FoRL training in **accompanying**. This is a role where volunteers attend specific appointments with a refugee or migrant (for example, with their local authority, an immigration authority, a school or medical appointment) and provide emotional and practical support.

- **Some of the things you may do** - ensure your client receives everything they are entitled to (a professional interpreter, accessible facilities etc.), take notes, ensure your partner understands what is being said, work with your partner to provide background documents as required.
- **What you won't do** - provide advice, speak for your partner, interrupt or direct the conversation, provide professional case work services.

If you would like to consider accompanying as an additional role, please get in touch with your FoRL contact and we will be happy to discuss options and training.

## 4. Befriending values.

Befriending is a very rewarding experience for everyone and the relationship you build will be special and unique. That requires time, effort, patience, flexibility, understanding, mutual trust and respect.

We ask volunteers to commit to FoRL's befriending values by:

- **Building trust** - refugees and migrants may have come from places of conflict and distress. They may find it hard to trust people, to talk about their issues or to ask for help. Building trust takes time and it cannot be rushed - but it is one of the most important things a befriender can offer. Never overpromise, always keep your word, be reliable and transparent.
- **Showing commitment** - meeting your partner regularly, staying in touch and keeping to arrangements as much as possible.
- **Being flexible** - refugees are not always entirely in control of their own lives and may have to change plans from time to time. Don't lose touch if you sense a lack of commitment, but talk to FoRL so we can assess.
- **Treating your client as an equal** - give them a voice, encourage participation and above all, offer choice. It is an individual's right to choose their own path and to establish their own goals. Befriending is not offering charity, it is an individual relationship between equals, and allows you to play a role in helping your partner build a sense of agency and purpose in their new community.
- **Communicating clearly and with transparency** - British systems can be very hard to navigate and understand, so make sure you are very clear with your client about anything you are supporting them with. If they need something for their home and you want to try and source it, be clear up-front that you can only try - don't guarantee it. And keep them updated on progress.. If you commit to attending a meeting and something comes up, tell them. If your life gets too busy to keep volunteering, tell them - and FoRL!
- **Listening** - it is possible that official interactions in the UK - with the immigration service, or with government agencies for example - have made your client feel unheard. At first, you may be the only person they have an opportunity to have a full conversation with, about their experiences, or any problems they are encountering.
- **Maintaining confidentiality** - never discuss or disclose any personal information about your client to anyone other than the person/s authorised to receive it, both during and after your involvement with FoRL. More information is available in the [safeguarding policy](#) available on the website.

- **Acting in a safe and responsible way** - our clients and our volunteers have a right to feel safe when operating under the FoRL name. Always consider your safety and that of your client, and report any concerns to FoRL immediately.
- **Leaving your preconceptions at the door** - you cannot know someone else's experience, regardless of their 'label'. Get to know your client as an individual.
- Working with FoRL to give and get **feedback** on your befriending, commit to taking part in **training** and other volunteer activities.
- Familiarising yourself with our basic information so you can **signpost** refugees to appropriate agencies, be aware of **cultural sensitivities**, and understand the **boundaries** of your role.
- **Being clear about your role and its limitations** - your befriending partner may have a limited understanding of who does what, and what a volunteer is. At an initial meeting we explain that it is not about legal advice, benefits or housing but for general support, friendship and help with English.

## 5. What don't befrienders do?

While befriending can be a path to a strong, lasting and equal friendship, it is very important to understand that there are limitations and boundaries. These are to protect both you and your client..

- **NEVER offer a professional service** - you are a volunteer representing Friends of Refugees London and your role is to offer friendship and the support of a good friend, not practical or professional help. **Regardless of your skills or professional experience, as a befriender you are not a GP, case worker, social worker, counsellor, benefits advisor, interpreter or head teacher and should not take responsibility for any of the issues facing refugees.** Volunteers must act professionally, but should never give legal advice, speak for someone without their permission and understanding, or interpret in medical settings. If your client is experiencing issues or you are unsure or worried about something you have heard, you should always refer your partner back to FoRL or contact us for advice
  - Even if you are an experienced practitioner in any of these areas, it is still extremely important to maintain boundaries and not offer professional advice within your befriending role.
- We do **not expect you to be on call day or night**, nor to do anything you don't feel comfortable with. There are many charities and organisations supporting refugees and migrants around London, and anything outside the FoRL remit of friendship and support should be referred to them . FoRL has lots of signposting information for volunteers.
- We **discourage dependency** - continuously providing everything for your partner doesn't help them in the long run, it simply creates dependency. Refugees are best supported in ways that empower them, that foster independence, and that enable them to feel the relationship is a two-way process. Some simple examples:
  - Your partner says she needs a new household item. **Do** suggest a trip to the charity shop, or help navigate an online platform to buy one (**Don't** spend time and money sourcing it immediately.)
  - Your partner asks for help getting to a regular appointment. **Do** teach her the bus/train route, accompany her the first few times then be available for phone support after that. (**Don't** drive her there every week.)
- **Do not act as an interpreter** - if you are able to, supporting refugees in their own language has many advantages: helping around the home, translating official letters, explaining how things work are all excellent ways to provide practical help. However, you should NEVER interpret for your client in a professional setting or capacity. It can put you at risk of being responsible for the outcome; and in some cases, for example in medical settings, it is illegal. Many services e.g. NHS are obliged and paid to provide official interpreters, many others offer it as a free service - ensuring those are in place for your client is a great way to help.



- **Do not provide financial assistance** - loans, gifts and direct donations are unhelpful. Even if they are done with the best of intentions, they can create a power imbalance and imbalances between other refugees and their volunteers; they can encourage dependency; and threaten the integrity of your relationship. If you are concerned about your client's financial situation, speak to FoRL and look for ways to help them access support, for example through one of our signposted support organisations, via their local council, etc.
- **Don't share private details about your client** with anyone other than your contact at FoRL or with other agencies by prior agreement. They have a right to privacy and safety and violating this is disrespectful, damaging and can even put your client and/or their family at risk. We understand it can be tempting to talk to friends when you have heard a distressing story or want to encourage others to volunteer but it is very important to keep all information related to refugees within FoRL. We are always on hand to discuss issues, and we also have a peer group system for volunteers to share their experiences and learn from each other.
- **Don't enter into a romantic or sexual relationship** with your befriending partner or any member of their family, even with consent.

Please refer to the [Code of Conduct document](#) and familiarise yourself with all our rules and values.

## 6. Befriending FAQs.

Here are some ideas for befriending. You will be supported by regular FoRL training, and we are also always on hand to offer extra support and advice.

### How often should we meet?

We ask that you commit to meeting up in person once a week, for up to two hours per week, depending on friendship and activities. Your meetings can be set up by text, WhatsApp or phone calls. You may also find you spend a small amount of time each week communicating via these methods about other things e.g. if they need advice or have a question.

Of course we understand that circumstances change. Your partner may have less time as they become more settled, make new friendships, take part in other social activities, start working etc. And you may find your own life changes. If this happens, talk to us and we can evaluate how best to move forward.

### Where should we meet?

For the majority of clients, your first meeting will take place outside the home under supervision by an experienced FoRL volunteer who is known to the family. We will agree this with you in advance but locations may include libraries, coffee shops, a local park.

Some clients' circumstances may require you to meet in their home - people with disabilities, with small children, or those who feel more comfortable in their own home. We will discuss and agree this with you in advance, and an experienced FoRL volunteer will be present.

As the relationship progresses, you may be invited to spend time in your client's home. You may also decide to start going out together, going shopping, visiting the local market etc. Just be sensitive to cultural considerations - for example, women may not immediately feel comfortable going out alone and might prefer short trips at first, or a trip with the whole family.

We don't expect any meetings to take place within your home, and we discourage it for at least the first 3-6 months of your relationship. This enables you to maintain boundaries and keep your home separate from your befriending work.

Please refer to the [FoRL safeguarding policy](#) for further guidance.

### What should we do?

Ask them when you first meet what they would like to do and what they are interested in. But be prepared to take the initiative and think up a loose plan of activities and places to visit together.

Ideas include:

- Help them get acquainted with their neighbourhood - take a trip around the local streets, visit places of local interest, explore community spaces together.
- Visit a local museum, library, art gallery, street market, sports centre - London is packed with free options.
- Sports can be a great leveller! Talk about going for a walk in the park, to a football match or on a bike ride. Many sporting organisations offer free options/have offers for refugees and migrants, so do your research together and see what appeals.
- Local playgroups are a fantastic resource for small children and are often free or very cheap - but they can be intimidating. Going with a friend can make all the difference and help your partner grow her network.
- Showing your partner how to source donations or find items in charity shops or via local recycle schemes can be helpful. Or use the supermarket as a language teaching tool and help each other to learn the names of items in your respective languages.
- Introduce them to local community or hobby groups - practical hobbies (sewing, cooking), sports (5-a-side football), outdoor pursuits (gardening, allotments), parenting groups and language groups are often popular and useful. Again, many groups are free or offer concessions for the most vulnerable - try reaching out and speaking to the organisers, many are delighted to help.
- Mobile phones are a lifeline to their community and families back home, so try to show them where they can access free Wi-Fi and internet.
- A trip to the countryside or seaside can be novel and exciting for refugees (taking cost into consideration).
- Find out about (or organise!) social events, especially if they are reflective of London life - barbecues, festivals, street parties and summer fairs can be great fun.

The main thing to remember is that you're a friend, there to make your partner feel valued and welcome. Having someone show a genuine interest in them and their welfare and being able to share simple pleasures together - talking, listening, walking, sharing a meal, feeling part of a family or group of friends - can be the most inclusive and meaningful experiences.

## **What should I wear?**

The befriending relationship is intended to feel comfortable for both you and your client. FoRL does not wish to curtail any of its volunteers' ability to express themselves in their clothing, but we do ask that volunteers give consideration to their client's comfort for the first meeting.

## **How do we communicate?**

FoRL will provide phone numbers to clients and their matched befriender after the first meeting. It will then be your responsibility to pick up and maintain contact.

Most, if not all, of our clients use WhatsApp and/ or text messages. Written English can be tricky so many clients rely on voice messages (tutorial is available [here](#) if you are unsure).

## **I am not an English teacher**

You don't need to be a trained English teacher to help someone with the basics - while your client may occasionally ask you for help with some learning (for example, with homework from their ESOL classes), we do not expect our volunteers to provide any formal teaching.

Although it may feel awkward or difficult to communicate at first, don't underestimate how helpful it is for someone learning English to hear and speak it.

If you are having trouble communicating, it may be worth using the Google Translate app. FoRL has access to trained ESOL teachers who can help with ideas and resources.

## **Am I volunteering with their children too?**

Children are the responsibility of their parents. FoRL does not accept children as clients. In line with FoRL's [safeguarding policy](#), you must not offer to look after them or be left alone with them at any time while befriending for FoRL.

If your client has children, it might be appropriate to bring your own children to some volunteering activities - for example, a trip to the playground or a family meal. We're generally amenable to this - children socialising can be a very positive experience. This shouldn't happen on your first meeting, and is subject to the same safeguarding policies as above. Please discuss with FoRL in advance so we are aware it is happening.

## **Do I need to contact FoRL after every visit with my client?**

In short, yes! It's important for both the client and for you to have a record of the support provided over the course of both of your relationships with FoRL. However, we also want to ensure this is a simple and quick process. FoRL will provide a simple way for you to update us after each meeting - it will depend on each client's circumstances but in general, you will need to log the date, location and a very brief overview of each meeting, along with details of anything you think may be important for us to know. For big issues or things you are worried about, please also make sure you call or email FoRL to raise it as a matter of concern.

## **Use of a car**

As London is so well served by public transport, we do not recommend that you give lifts to your partner. In the case of specific circumstances (for example, taking a disabled client to a hospital appointment), FoRL requires two days' notice including date, time, destination and registration number. FoRL does not accept responsibility for any journeys undertaken by car, or costs incurred. If you do need to use your car, you will also need to ensure you have the appropriate insurance in place.

## What if our friendship doesn't work out?

Like any other relationship, befriending is largely based on how well you and your partner get along. In our experience, many befriending relationships go on to become natural friendships. We acknowledge however, that they don't all work out. Life happens - circumstances change, a language barrier might become too challenging, one person might stop responding, or perhaps the chemistry just isn't right.

If this happens, get in touch with FoRL and we can talk through any issues. We can also speak to your partner and try to work out what's going on from their perspective. Often this is enough to resolve minor problems. But whatever it is, tell us and we can sort it.

## What if there is a problem with my client or with FoRL?

If you can't find the answer to your problem in this handbook, the [safeguarding policy](#) or the [Code of Conduct](#), please contact the volunteer manager. This could be for any issue, ranging from not feeling that you've been matched with the right client, to a problem your client is facing that you feel you can't help them resolve.

If your issue is with FoRL, please refer to our [Grievance and Disciplinary Procedures](#).

## 7. Support for volunteers.

After your initial compulsory induction, FoRL will aim to run training sessions quarterly where we'll share ideas and information, get feedback and suggestions, train you in the basics of volunteer befriending, etc. We also plan to run social events where you can meet other volunteers and refugees.

At the first introduction meeting with your befriending partner, FoRL will be present to introduce you and answer any questions. Don't worry if you feel anxious about the first meeting - it is natural, and your partner will probably be feeling the same! This meeting is about breaking the ice and getting to know each other.

We will contact you after one month for a discussion, and after 3 months for a fuller review. We also work closely with refugees and get feedback from them on the relationship. But remember - we are always around for feedback, advice or support. Never feel you need to wait until your next call or meeting.

Finally, it is possible that your client has upsetting stories to tell and as your friendship grows, they may decide to confide in you about their experiences. These stories aren't always easy to hear and may distress you - if this happens and you want some support in managing your feelings, don't hesitate to call us and we'll arrange to talk to you.

### Identifying and mitigating risk

FoRL is vigilant about safety and we do as much as we can to safeguard you. Please take time to read the FoRL [safeguarding policy](#) to understand how FoRL works to protect clients and volunteers, as well as to support you to identify risks.

We would never knowingly match a volunteer with someone considered to be a risk but we can't know everything about them so please be aware of your personal safety and take sensible precautions. After the initial supervised meeting, you may want to tell a friend or relative when and where you will be visiting, who you will see and what time you expect to be finished; and let that person know when you have left.

## 8. Useful links.

Below you will find a selection of resources provided by Friends of Refugees London, as well as signposting to relevant services which work to support refugees, asylum-seekers, and vulnerable migrants.

### Friends of Refugees London information

- [Our website](#)
- [Our constitution](#)
- [Befriender role description](#)
- [Volunteer Agreement and Code of Conduct](#)
- [Safeguarding policy](#)
- [Privacy policy](#)
- [Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion policy](#)
- [Grievances and Disciplinary procedures](#)

### Signposting to other services

The services listed here usually have a wealth of information for clients as well as for volunteers on their websites. We mention them here to give you some background knowledge of the infrastructure of support for refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants. **We do not expect any volunteer to directly contact any of the organisations below on behalf of their clients.** Many clients will have existing case workers, usually from the Refugee Council or LRMN, and volunteers should always direct their clients back to their case worker for any query FoRL cannot answer to them first, rather than attempting to resolve it themselves. We will cover this in our training but it is very important to respect professional boundaries and allow case workers to do their jobs.

#### [The Refugee Council](#)

The Refugee Council is a national charity which supports the rights of refugees & migrants. In Lewisham, it is the lead resettlement agency, employed by Lewisham Council to deliver a broad range of services and provide intensive case work support to many resettled refugees when they first arrive. Clients should be directed here for all service-based enquiries, and for resettlement related queries such as family reunification.

#### [Lewisham Refugee & Migrant Network](#)

Lewisham Refugee & Migrant Network (LRMN) is a leading migrants' rights charity in south London. It is also a referral partner of Friends of Refugee London, which means many of our clients will be supported by their case workers. They have specialist advisers in immigration, housing, wellbeing, mental health and more. Many of their drop-in services should be a first port of call for FoRL clients.

### [Lewisham Council](#)

Lewisham Council subcontracts most of the direct provision for refugees and migrants to other organisations, but it takes overall responsibility for the refugee resettlement scheme, and for the majority of statutory services refugees & migrants have access to: housing, healthcare and education services, social care, social welfare and so on. There is a dedicated team and a councillor for refugee rights - clients should be directed to these teams only for big issues that cannot be resolved via their formal caseworker or other organisations.

### [Action for Refugees in Lewisham](#)

Action for Refugees in Lewisham (AFRIL) has a range of services to meet the needs of asylum seekers, vulnerable migrants and refugees in south east London. They provide several core services including a foodbank, a Saturday school for refugee children, advice and advocacy services, immigration advice, and wellbeing activities. Clients should be directed here for broad support, and for the Saturday school which is very popular.

### [Refugee Cafe](#)

Refugee Cafe is a social enterprise which aims to create living wage employment for refugee chefs, provide them with skills training, and eventually open a cafe. They also host community events, workshops, and feasts. Clients with an interest in enterprise, cooking, retail can apply for voluntary work and skills training.

### [Citizens UK](#)

Citizens UK is a national community organising charity which works to tackle injustice in our local communities. At a local level, they are excellent at supporting refugees in becoming agents of change and self-advocacy; campaigning for improved services; and developing relationships with other institutions. South London campaign areas currently include: affordable housing, youth safety, migrant rights, mental health, parenting, the climate crisis and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) provision.

### [Lewisham Donation Hub](#)

Lewisham Donation Hub is a voluntary organisation which supports the homeless, those without recourse to public funds, refugees & others in the community facing hardship. They are based in Unit D, Place Ladywell, 261 Lewisham High Street, London SE13 6AY but PLEASE check their website or social media before referring your client to visit, as their opening times and the types of service they offer changes depending on day and their staffing and donation levels.

### [Lewisham Local](#)

Lewisham Local is a community engagement tool which aims to bring people together. They have really useful tools for clients, such as a directory of volunteering opportunities and local charities looking for help; a Bank of Things where 11-25 year olds can access material and wellbeing support; lists of foodbanks and support organisations and much more.

Please also check our website for more organisations; we will be adding more signposting on an ongoing basis.