

Welcome to HostNation

Charity registration no. 1180004

We connect socially isolated refugees and asylum seekers with volunteer befrienders to experience our cities together, practise their English, build their independence and help them participate. We want to help them thrive rather than simply survive.

We welcome partnerships with other organisations that share our aims and would like to scale up befriending opportunities for their service users.

About HostNation

As a digital introductory platform, we tackle the loneliness experienced by asylum-seekers and refugees in our cities by making it easier for those of us at home in Britain to connect with those looking for a place they can call home. HostNation aims to transform social relations in our communities, by using technology to bring local people and refugees together through small acts of hospitality, inclusion and friendship.

HostNation started in 2017 and is a befriending service currently operating across Greater London.

Our proposition is based on the altruistic impulse of loving a stranger (500+ people have registered with us to befriend a lonely refugee in London and a further 400+ have expressed interest).

We offer a bridge that connects people socially (600+ Londoners have made new friends)

We've built a community and a volunteer movement (we have the largest online resource of volunteer refugee befrienders in the UK)

We wish to take our digital proposition to UK cities beyond London (we want HostNation to become *the way* to befriend refugees in our cities - online, easy, sustainable and scaleable)

We work in partnership with over 30 refugee service providers as well as NHS social prescribers, ESOL colleges and community organisations to identify socially isolated, adult, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. We then use our digital platform to make meaningful matches to local voluntary befrienders based on geography, shared interests and compatible demographics. We facilitate face-to-face introductions and provide guidance, resources and relationship support for 3 months, to help sustain relationships and encourage genuine friendship.

Many people live parallel but unconnected lives in the same areas; generating inter-cultural friendships with people of different backgrounds, some with traumatic pasts who have been plunged deeper into isolation by Covid-19, needs careful facilitation. Post-Covid, social connections at a local level and opportunities to show solidarity are going to be needed more than ever.

"Actually, I LOVE having a befriender. For the first time I've had a good friend here in the UK. Thank you HostNation." ASYLUM SEEKER

You can be yourself and forget about your traumas. I've learnt that there's hope, there's a future here in London. It's why I'm still alive." REFUGEE



Why refugees and asylum seekers need our support

Refugees and asylum seekers arrive here having fled violence, persecution and war. They then face the daunting task of negotiating a different culture, language and system, away from loved ones or any support network. It's not only hard, it's lonely. And on top of that, many are housed in the areas with the highest levels of deprivation and most at risk of Covid-19.

Refugees tell us that they spend a lot of time alone and don't have enough to do, they feel depressed and lonely, they want to meet more British people and enjoy what London has to offer, but don't know how. Language is a key barrier; many asylum seekers and refugees have difficulty accessing ESOL classes and the lack of opportunities to improve and practise their spoken English isolates them further. We know this because all of us at HostNation have worked on the frontline supporting refugees: as befrienders, in crisis support and at drop-in centres. And two of our Trustees, Dina Nayeri and Emiljan Gega, were both child refugees, fleeing with their families from Iran and Albania respectively. This accumulated experience gives us a strong understanding of the issues and barriers faced by refugees and asylum seekers.

At HostNation we believe that every refugee deserves to have a friend. The opportunity to meet someone who treats them as an equal and a friend, to be invited out and to practise English in a fun, friendly and non-judgmental context, can have a transformative impact on their lives. Accelerating these opportunities is especially vital at a time of rising intolerance, hate crime and negative stereotyping of refugees and asylum seekers.

Building Bridges; creating friendships. How we help.

We know that very few big refugee organisations have been able to sustain a befriending initiative. In London they are fighting to provide a range of crisis services such as housing, deportation and advocacy at a time of unprecedented demand and funding cuts, at the expense of wellbeing services such as befriending. They are focused on service provision, while we provide social provision.

We want to complement not compete. HostNation has the skills, expertise and digital capacity to add value to the sector and offer



a befriending service available to all. We can bring people together quickly and provide flexible, online opportunities for younger people to volunteer to support refugees.

We see ourselves as a 'progressive hybrid' combining face-to-face social interaction with intelligent use of digital for operational ease, leanness, efficiency and scale. We have ambition combined with low overheads. We want to work with others, so jointly we can increase our social impact.



"Having someone who cares makes you feel human again." ASYLUM SEEKER

"I'm glad I've been able to be there for her since she won her appeal. It has been an emotional journey, but she is doing amazingly. I feel we've had a huge impact on each other's lives and I'm so grateful I signed up to HostNation and met her and her gorgeous daughter."

BEFRIENDER

Our process works as follows:



Refugees are referred online to HostNation by a partner agency – providing personal info, interests, current situation, data consent.



Befrienders register their interest online, providing personal info, photo ID, 2x references.

Befrienders are sent guides, screened (via 45min telephone call) and reference checked.



Matches are made quickly and efficiently on our digital platform based on location, age, gender and shared interests – we identify matches that are meaningful, compatible, local and likely to be sustained.



HostNation informs the refugee, referrer and befriender about the potential match. Refugees receive a detailed profile about their befriender and information on befriending (usually by post as few have regular online access). We seek consent from all parties to proceed to introduction.



HostNation arranges either an introductory face-to-face meeting or an online video introduction. This is facilitated either by the referrer or by one of the HostNation team.



HostNation supports and monitors matches for an initial 3 month period, during which they will see each other an average of 7-10 times and be in phone contact weekly. We circulate a fortnightly newsletter on free events and activities that they can do together (e.g. Open House events, local festivals, free gigs, markets, museums) as well as ideas and opportunities for their refugee friends (free English classes, training, volunteering, refugee projects etc).



HostNation seeks regular qualitative & quantitative feedback from both the refugee and the befriender on the impact and benefits of their friendship, the likelihood that it will be sustained and ways to evolve and improve the programme.

Current scope of operations

Since 2017 our programme has run across Greater London's boroughs. We have focused on sustaining and improving the London programme as a centre of excellence and best practice.

In 2020 we were ready to roll out – in partnership with existing refugee services – to cities in the NE & NW of England, such as Middlesbrough, Newcastle, Liverpool and Greater Manchester where there are high levels of dispersal, real evidence of need and which have been badly impacted by the virus. Covid has slowed our expansion plans. In October we opened a hub in Teesside in partnership with IPC (Investing in People and Culture) and hope to create new partnerships across the North of England in 2021.

Monitoring and evaluating our impact

Since 2017, we have had **300+ referrals in London** (from over 30 refugee organisations that we work with) and we have **connected 600+ people** who would otherwise never have met. **81% of these relationships have been successful and sustained** (15-20% unable to be sustained because of mental ill health or relocation outside of London).

Whilst we record user data, we ultimately judge success less by the number of matches we make and more by their impact and sustainability as long-term friendships. We measure how the match impacts both the refugee (e.g. loneliness, wellbeing, confidence, spoken English) and the befriender (e.g. whether the experience was positive, rewarding, broadened their outlook).

Our Evaluation Manager produces a six-monthly service evaluation report analysing all the data collected; we use these reports to improve our process, service and relationships.



"Thank you HostNation for my wonderful friend. I really appreciate having her."

REFUGEE

"It has enriched my life in ways I didn't think it would. It has made me see the joy in small things. It's the simple human connections that matter."

BEFRIENDER

Our current programme benefits refugees by:

- Helping them to develop the social skills and spoken English needed to navigate and adapt to a new culture, language and system.
- Improving their confidence, independence and wellbeing, providing new opportunities and helping them to participate more fully in life.
- Enhancing their lived experience of London* – its parks, places and people.

*We hope to roll out to other UK cities in 2021

95% of refugees report a positive experience

86% say their English has improved

85% report greater well being

82% say they are less lonely

81% are participating more

80% feel more included

94% of befrienders tell us it has increased their cultural understanding

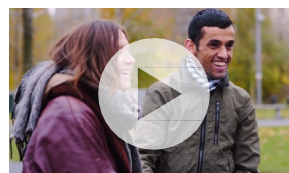
88% say they're likely to remain in touch over the next year

84% have found it a positive and rewarding experience

Alongside these transformative changes we have also witnessed other unexpected personal benefits; for example, one befriender introduced his Afghan Doctor befriender to the local CCG, where he now works three days a week. Another refugee was able to secure a University place to study aeronautical engineering after his befriender helped tutor him for three hours each week.

The power of befriending

Here are links to a short film and an interview with our matches:



SUZY & HAKIM

<https://vimeo.com/309771300>



HELEN & HANIFAH

<https://vimeo.com/391708540>

A friendly Londoner by their side can be a lifeline and help refugees and asylum seekers to thrive rather than simply survive in the city.

Post Covid-19

Lockdown and social distancing has only compounded problems of loneliness and isolation amongst refugees and asylum seekers.

The places that provided them with a sense of community and belonging and sometimes paid their fares and offered them free wifi – refugee services, community projects, drop-in centres, ESOL Colleges, libraries, churches and mosques – have had to close their doors. The restoration of these services won't happen overnight. Continuing social distancing rules will make gatherings under one roof difficult, if not impossible. A much more feasible way to start reconnecting safely with our cities are one-to-one meet ups out of doors.

People have built their capacity for compassion and connection during this crisis. There has been a groundswell of community spirit and neighbourliness that has emerged in response to Covid-19, which we hope to be able to channel towards future connection with refugees. Covid-19 has shown up the inequalities and social injustice in our communities through its disproportionate impact on those areas with the highest levels of deprivation, poverty, temporary housing and ethnic diversity.

We have taken part in the *Jo Cox Commission into Loneliness* and we have recently joined the Connection Coalition to work with others in enabling greater social connection in our communities post Covid-19. Refugee organisations that cannot continue as before will be looking to the community for support for their clients. We are keen and ready to partner with them.

"I think it's motivation and positivity that she has given me. It allows you to be more and do more yourself. I recommend it 100%."

ASYLUM SEEKER

"He is like another member of my family and I can only thank you for that. I can honestly say that joining HostNation is one of the best and most rewarding things I have ever done."

BEFRIENDER

HostNation & City of Sanctuary

HostNation grew out of City of Sanctuary. In 2016 a local group of people with goodwill towards refugees got together in Camden to think about how to make the city more welcoming for refugees. What was missing was a simple mechanic to connect this community goodwill and offer of friendship to those in need of it. This led to HostNation, a digital means of making real life connections. We have developed, refined and tested a digital delivery method for befriending in Greater London and we have evidence that it works. Between 2017-2020 we have connected over 600 people in the capital – London residents with refugees. Over 80% have become sustained and positive relationships; lives have been transformed, genuine friendships created and some tell us they are friends for life.

The purpose of HostNation is to make it easier to scale up opportunities to befriend (and be befriended). We have the digital systems and online processes to make registering befrienders, referring socially isolated refugees and asylum seekers and making matches simple. We have online and printed training materials and guides to all aspects of befriending. We have built in GDPR and safeguarding protocols and we have secured funding.

We are happy to share our expertise, knowledge and resources with partner organisations who anticipate 50+ befriending matches in their area and would like to befriend the HostNation way. We can help train a local volunteer or staff member to manage and run the HostNation programme in your city.



If you would like further information about HostNation or would like to discuss a potential partnership, please contact **Anneke Elwes**, Founder and Director on **07711 130818** or email anneke@hostnation.org.uk