An introduction to background checks for job seekers and volunteers

If you are applying for volunteering or employment opportunities in the UK, you will be asked to consent to background checks.

These checks may be daunting, especially if you are low on energy, confidence or time.

Getting through background checks the first time can be hard. We hope this information sheet will help you to get through challenges with checks so you can secure opportunities that are important to you.

What are background checks?

Background checks describe the different ways people involved in employee or volunteer recruitment try to find out more about you from people who have known you. It might include activities such as

- Confirming your identity
- Checking your relevant certificates or qualifications
- Asking people who know you to comment on your character or work (this is known as a reference)
- Reviewing any criminal records
- Asking for information about your health from your doctor.

The way background checks are conducted in the UK can be difficult to understand, especially as what is required can vary from role to role, even in the same organisation.

Why do businesses and organisations do background checks?

- Through background checks, an organisation is trying to gain information that will help them feel confident to offer you a role. They need to be sure that with the resources, training and support available, you will be able to fulfil the role in a way that is safe for yourself and for others.
- Some background checks take place because an organisation is legally obliged to take steps to identify people who might abuse children or vulnerable adults, or who may pose a threat to security.
- Some background checks take place to meet professional standards.

What choice do I have in background checks?

- Where background checks happen, it is required by law that the same background information is sought for all candidates.
- You should always be asked to consent to background checks, but if you don’t consent, it means you will probably not be offered the role.

What are the rules for businesses and organisations?

- The information that organisations can and can’t ask you for and what they do with it, is controlled strictly by law. Information from background checks for recruitment is not shared with other authorities such as the Home Office

- Organisations should make it clear what background checks will be carried out for a role before you apply. They should also provide a named contact applicants can speak to, to ask any questions about the process.
- Background checks usually start after you ‘pass’ a recruitment process and say you would like to take the role.

- Organisations should cover the cost of background checks. If you have an issue with cost, seek support from a key worker, or job centre adviser who may be able to help.

Confirming your identity

It can be hard to prove your identity when you are new to a country, or when you are in the asylum system. There are however steps you can take to enable you to prove your identity more easily.

- Try to gain some of the documents from the Disclosure and Barring Services’ approved list.
- Where possible ask for bills or formal letters to be addressed to you by your full name, and make sure it is properly spelled. Get any mistakes in your documents corrected as soon as possible.
- If you already have refugee status and can afford it, or if a key worker can fund you, sign up for a provisional driving licence.

Certificates or qualifications

If you have qualifications, find out how you may get them checked and validated. Find out what the equivalent qualifications and experiences are called in the UK and how people talk about them. This can help you to be better understood.

If an organisation is unable to verify your qualifications, the embassy of the country you qualified in may be able to help. Professional organisations in the country you are from may also be able to confirm your qualifications and information about your performance during your time in the profession.

Professional organisations in the UK may also be able to help recruiters be confident in your qualifications.

References

You may be asked to provide names and contact details of people that are not related to you, who have known you, professionally or personally, for a certain number of years. The organisation will contact those people and ask them to say something about your suitability for a role.

It is common for people who are new to the country to struggle to meet reference requirements.

- If you work closely with a key worker, or if you have children and the staff at their school are getting to know you, they may be able to offer a character reference for you.
- If you can’t provide a reference, talk to the recruiting manager. In certain roles they may be able to be flexible and allow you to start with an adapted role, or with supervision. They may need to ask for advice from an expert.
- If you don’t have people who can offer you a reference, you could consider taking on a role that doesn’t require a reference, so that you can become known by people who can give you a reference in the future.
- It may also help if you keep the names and contact details of people you meet who could become future referees, and keep records of the dates, roles and organisations you volunteer or work within the UK.

Criminal record checks

If you apply for roles in which you will have specific forms of contact with vulnerable adults and children, or where you might have access to sensitive information, the following might happen:

- you may be asked if you have a criminal record
- you may be asked if you have ever been disciplined in or stopped from doing any role because of your behaviour.

- you may be asked to consent to a ‘Disclosure and Barring Service’ check – otherwise known as a ‘DBS check’ or criminal records check.

The Disclosure and Barring Service is the official organisation in the UK that can access information about criminal records and offer certificates showing relevant parts of people’s records to recruiters. There are different levels of DBS check available, so that only information appropriate to the role you are applying for is shared.

You can work or volunteer even if you have a criminal record, but you may not be permitted to undertake certain roles. It is important you declare any records you are legally required to, when asked. There are laws concerning what you can be asked and what you must share. If in doubt, seek guidance.

If you have been criminalised as a result of trafficking or things you had to do for survival on your journey to asylum, work with a lawyer, counsellor, or trusted case worker to discuss how to talk about it during recruitment.

As part of the process, you are asked to prove your identity using documents the Disclosure and Barring Service acknowledge as official identity documents.

Many people will struggle to meet the paperwork requirements, through no fault of their own. If you are unable to provide the paperwork needed, you can still get a DBS check by registering your fingerprint with the police.

- Anyone over the age of 16 can get a DBS check whatever your immigration status, or however long you have been in the country.
- Regardless of a person’s background, it usually takes around two weeks for a check to be processed if the application is made correctly.
- Getting involved in volunteering that requires the same level of check as a role you may want in the future, could help you to build up experience and references, and mean you have a DBS check in place when you apply.
- If you have applied for a DBS check you can register with the DBS Update Service to keep your DBS certificate up to date. This means future employers or volunteer managers can check your certificate without needing to request a new check. There is no cost for volunteers for an update.
- This guidance for overseas applicants from the Disclosure and Barring Service may help you and any organisation you are applying to join. See our information sheet on DBS checks for further information.

International checks

For some roles (like teaching or nursing) an organisation may need to find out if you have any criminal history in the places you have lived abroad. There are different arrangements in place for different countries.

Information on how you can get a ‘certificate of good character’ for different countries is provided by the UK government.

If employers cannot do a background check, they are expected to obtain as much information as possible in the form of references before deciding whether to make an offer of employment.

If you could be put at risk because a check will make your location known to authorities in another country you have lived in, you could speak with Human Resources (HR) in the organisation, or seek legal advice.

Problem solving

At the same time as wanting to operate safely, organisations also need people from different backgrounds to apply. If issues and potential solutions are pointed out, problems can often be solved.

Time

Find out if you will miss an opportunity if checks take a long time, and if there would be the potential to start the role or training before checks are complete.

If you do miss an opportunity, but have already applied for a DBS check, you will still receive a certificate and this may help

you secure another role more easily.

Trust and compliance

Lots of background checks involve you being asked to share information, documents or contacts that you might not have, or to take part in processes that you may not understand or may feel nervous about.

- It is ok to ask for more information on what you are being asked to do, and the consequences of checks before you consent to them
- Make sure you understand what is being asked in background checks. A lot of words have technical meanings that aren’t the same as ordinary meanings, and there is no reason you would know it.
- If you see an opportunity you are interested in, but the background checks seem impossible to comply with, it is worth speaking to the recruiting manager or a HR manager, or seeking specialist advice at the earliest opportunity.

Many organisations may not understand the particular challenges people who’ve been in the asylum system face with background checks, and they might not be aware of the different ways they might overcome these barriers. Often there will be alternative ways to proceed.

Official translation

If any vetting documents need translating, the embassy of the country the information comes from may be able to help, where it is safe for you to ask them to do so.

Technology and access

Recruiters should be able to offer you a comfortable space and the equipment needed to take part in any checks, and cover any expenses involved in taking part. Job centres, libraries or community centres may be able to offer you access to computers and a good internet connection that can help you to process the checks as easily as possible.

Trauma and wellbeing

You might find that background checks feel intrusive, raise difficult memories and feelings or that it can be hard to comply with what is being asked.

Think about what might help you to remain well in the process. For example, it may help if you can bring someone with you, or for a process to happen in a certain place.

If you need to share something personal about your history or about a challenge you are facing in the process, it can help to plan out what you are going to say and how you will say it in advance.

Choosing roles that have regular recruitment, or that offer transfer opportunities can reduce stress, and reduce the risk of lost time and opportunity if checks take some time, or if you need to move house.

If you have a bad experience with people facilitating background checks and it feels safe to offer feedback, this can help solve the issue, and offer an opportunity for you to regain trust in the people and process. Similarly, if you have a positive experience, it can help people to know what they have done well.

This information sheet was written by Migration Yorkshire in December 2022. If you have any questions, please get in touch and we'll do our best to help you: admin@migrationyorkshire.org.uk or 0113 378 8188.

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