

Selected findings from the external evaluation of

FRIENDS SHOW THE WAY 2019-2022

- with a special focus on the benefit to refugees.



Friends Show The Way is a partnership between the Red Cross and the Danish Refugee Council, matching refugees with volunteer friends and families.



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FOREWORD

This publication presents selected findings from the external evaluation of Friends Show The Way, conducted by Als Research for the Red Cross and the Danish Refugee Council.

The publication is aimed at volunteers, partners and stakeholders interested in how volunteer friends and families can support the well-being and social inclusion of persons with a refugee background. The focus is therefore mainly on how the relationships work, and on the benefits that the target group experiences through the initiative. Friends Show The Way is a nationwide effort that builds on a broad and strong organisational base. The organisation and spread of the initiative are therefore also illuminated.

The selected focus areas mean that a number of the evaluation's other findings

and recommendations for the project's further development are not included in this publication. The full evaluation report may be found in Danish at www.vennerviservej.dk

The evaluation is based on an extensive data foundation, including:

- More than 70 interviews conducted with refugees, volunteers, municipal partners, social housing actors, etc.
- A questionnaire survey among municipal representatives
- Three deep-cut mappings, which is an in-depth interview method that can highlight complex contexts and themes
- The organisations' own data, e.g. monitoring reports, annual questionnaire surveys among volunteers, course evaluations, etc.

Reading guide



- Individuals or families matched with volunteers are referred to in this publication as refugees. They may also be the descendants of refugees, reunited family members or other persons from ethnic minority backgrounds who are in need of support.
- In the Red Cross, volunteers with a coordinating role are called activity leaders; in the Danish Refugee Council they are called coordinators. In this publication they are termed volunteer leaders.
- The following abbreviations are used in some places: FSTW for Friends Show The Way, RC for the Red Cross, and DRC for the Danish Refugee Council.
- Locally, the initiative is also known by other names, particularly *Network Families and Individuals*.
- With the exception of the case pairs in the evaluation, all informants have been promised anonymity and do not therefore appear under their names.

ABOUT FRIENDS SHOW THE WAY

The Red Cross and the Danish Refugee Council have been running the project Friends Show The Way in close cooperation since 2016. The project was set up to offer refugees across the country a volunteer friend or friendship family, in cooperation with the municipalities.

During the initial period (2016-2018), the focus was on offering volunteer friends to the many new refugees arriving in Denmark at that time, especially from Syria and Eritrea.

This evaluation covers the second period of the project (2019-22), when the target group was extended to include people with a refugee background who have been in the country for an extended period of time. In this context, an objective has been to cooperate not only with municipalities, but also with social housing actors. At the same time, the project has continued to offer volunteer friends to newly arrived refugees, most recently from Ukraine.

More than 10,000 people with a refugee background have been provided with a match for a shorter or longer period of time during the lifetime of the project¹.

With Friends Show The Way, a national voluntary initiative has been built up which means that refugees can be offered a voluntary friend or friendship family almost irrespective of where they live in the country. With a current presence in 84 municipalities at the end of 2022, and plans to launch in six more, Friends Show The Way covers the vast majority of Denmark's 98 municipalities.

Local volunteer groups take care of the day-to-day running of the initiative, with the support of consultants from the Danish Refugee Council and the Red Cross. A volunteer leader is responsible for matching volunteers with refugees, and there is close cooperation with the municipalities on referring refugees to the service, but also with other actors such as language schools and social housing actors.

In combination, the national coverage and local organisation provides a scalable infrastructure with access to volunteer resources and referring partners. This enables Friends Show The Way to offer volunteer friends to many people in a short time when the need arises, as it did after Russia invaded Ukraine.

The evaluation data point to a correlation between the number of newly arrived refugees and family members and the number of new matches in the project. While the number of new matches began to decrease after 2018, a significant increase has been seen again in 2022.

In 2022, 1,235 refugees and reunified family members were matched with volunteer friends.

That is more than three times as many people as in 2021. While it cannot be said with certainty, the evaluation estimates that newly arrived Ukrainians make up a significant proportion of the new matches.

Friends Show The Way is funded by the Ministry of Immigration and Integration.

THE TARGET GROUP OF 'FRIENDS SHOW THE WAY'

Persons with a refugee background who could benefit from a volunteer friend in order to boost their well-being and social network, participate more actively in society and form a better connection with the labour market. Participants may be families or individuals. They must have the time and energy to enter into a relationship with a volunteer, and must be at least 18 years of age. Children under 18 can participate with their parents.

¹Sources: LG Insight: Evaluation of Friends Show The Way (2019) and the organisations' own data. The figure is based on the results of the evaluation of the first project period. To this has been added the number of new matches per year.

AHMAD, BODIL & OLE



"They are like a family here. They are like a father and mother to me, and grandparents to my children."

- AHMAD

That is how 41-year-old Ahmad describes his friends, Bodil and Ole. When Ahmad came to Denmark from Syria seven years ago, he found himself alone in a new country with no language skills, no job and no family. As he says himself, he started from zero. But Ahmad didn't want to remain at zero – he wanted to create a life in Denmark. He was therefore matched with Ole and Bodil, who before their retirement had worked as school teachers and now wished to help newly arrived refugees.

Over time, they have helped Ahmad learn to navigate the Danish system and manage contacts with the bank, the Immigration Service and doctor's appointments. They have helped him to learn Danish, understand how holiday pay and overtime work, and the difference between dangerous quick loans and sensible bank loans.

"I've never asked Ole for anything that he has said no to. He has always said yes," says Ahmad, who in return is also ready to help Ole. "I've said many times that if he ever needs help, he just needs to call me."

- AHMAD

After a few years Ahmad's wife Zainab joined him in Denmark, and they now live with their three children in Odense, where the whole family can regularly be seen together with Ole and Bodil, who also help the children with their homework.

"It has become more and more like a friendship, and I consider him a good friend. During the Covid pandemic I wrote to him using the word 'friend' and I remember him replying something like, 'I'm your friend, too!'"

- OLE

With three children, work and studies, the family is busy and they do not see Ole and Bodil as often as before. But if you ask Ahmad what the best thing is about having Ole and Bodil as friends, his answer is simple: family.

"They are nice people. They are my family here in Denmark. I can't say any more, because once I've said they're my family, that says it all," he says.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS FOR THE TARGET GROUP?

The initiative is adapted to the individual refugee, for which reason the concrete benefits of the relationship vary from person to person. However, the evaluation points to a number of common effects for the target group:

Refugees with volunteer friends in FSTW often become better at speaking Danish. For a significant proportion of refugees in the project, the desire to improve their Danish language skills is one of their primary motivations for having a volunteer friend.

The vast majority of the matched pairs speak Danish when they see each other, and use Danish when they communicate in writing. Strengthened language skills are thus often achieved as a result of language training. This can be particularly valuable for those refugees who are not (yet) in the labour market, as well as for those who do not speak Danish at their workplace.

"I think it's very important to make Danish friends. For example, if I only have Arab friends from Syria, we only speak Arabic to each other, and then it becomes much harder to improve my Danish."

- Refugee

Refugees with volunteer friends gain a stronger understanding of Danish culture and society. Through conversations and interaction with volunteer friends, the refugees say that they have learned about Danish festivals, food culture, history, social conditions, norms and social codes. Child-rearing is also an important topic of conversation in this context, as the participants want their children to thrive and do well in Denmark.

"My children were born and are growing up here, so I need to learn how to raise them. Someone who can show me different things about Danish culture and how it works in general. I needed someone who could show me that."

- Refugee

"Another example is if you have to contact someone on the phone. If you need help with the municipality. Then they also help with that. At first it was a bit hard for me, but now it's very easy."

- Refugee

Refugees with volunteer friends in FSTW often become better at understanding and navigating Danish society. Refugees are often helped by their volunteer friends to understand official letters and other communications from the public authorities and other organisations. The help is not just about language, but also about understanding a complex and sometimes opaque system. Refugees with volunteer friends often gain a better understanding of not only what is expected of them, but also why. Several refugees also report that they are now able to navigate the system, contact relevant authorities and find solutions to challenges themselves.

"I actually felt alone. I really wanted to have someone who would be like a mother in Iraq. It's like, if you have a problem, you pick up the phone and call your mother and tell her about it. I missed having someone like that in my life."

- Refugee

The relationships create networks to a limited extent. Refugees often develop a strong bond with their volunteer friend, who thus becomes part of the close network. A number of the participants however find that they do not have any other Danish friends besides their volunteer friend. They may meet the volunteer's friends, without these necessarily becoming part of the refugee's own network. However, it should be stressed that the volunteers' network can be available and beneficial to refugees in other ways.

Refugees with volunteer friends often find work or get closer to the labour market. Refugees are often very keen to get into employment quickly, and the evaluation includes several examples of volunteers who have helped their friends to get jobs or work placements. Volunteers can act as bridge-builders to the local business community, perhaps by drawing on their own contacts, or by recommending the refugee to relevant workplaces. At the same time, the voluntary support also means increased retention in cases where the refugee is in an internship or has a job.

"I took him by the hand and went to some business managers and said: 'I can vouch for this guy. Can you and will you give him a chance?' And it has paid off."

- Volunteer

"I am very happy. It's really good. Sometimes I talk to my parents, and say: 'Now I can do everything myself, and for my children I am now both mother and father. And I earn my own money, look after my children and many other things.' My mother is very happy when she hears that I am happy."

- Refugee

Everyday coping skills and independence are strengthened in interplay with better Danish language competence and an enhanced understanding of the system. The vast majority of refugees achieve better everyday skills as they gain a better understanding of the system and greater competence in the Danish language. In this way, they become better able to independently seek solutions to everyday challenges, act independently, and run their own lives.



The children often join the local associations. Many of the parents are busy with full-time work and language lessons, and find that they do not have the desire and/or the energy to participate in associations in their free time. However, volunteers often support

and assist families to enrol their children in various leisure activities and, for example, help them to apply for support for membership fees.

Refugees with volunteer friends often feel more comfortable and secure.

The majority of refugees have fled appalling conditions and events in their home countries, and many have endured further horrors during their journey to Denmark. Many describe feeling overwhelmed and alone when they first arrived, and several highlight the importance of the volunteer friend in alleviating loneliness. The psychosocial support is provided not only in the difficult or emotional conversations, but also in the small interactions of everyday life, where refugees can feel that someone wishes them well. Together with increased language skills, well-being and security provide an important foundation for other positive effects.

"Sometimes I feel a bit sad about something. Or something happens to me. Then I tell her and we talk about it. I feel very safe when I talk to her. She tries to help me, and she comforts me."

Refugee

HEND & RIE



"I lack a social life because I came here without a family."

- HEND

Hend, who came to Denmark from Syria in 2015, is 40 years old and has three children. Rie, 26, is expecting her first child. The two women have been friends since 2020, and although they are in very different places in their lives, they agree they are a great match.

"We had good chemistry right from the start and then, like any other relationship, it developed over time and got better. You feel more secure, and you have more shared experiences. Our relationship has never been a purely practical one."

- RIE

From the first day, the social side of things has been central to their relationship – perhaps because Hend had already been in Denmark for five years when she met Rie, and therefore already possessed the basic prerequisites to navigate Danish society. But Hend wants to get an education and a good job, and she knows that the way to do that is through good Danish language skills and a better understanding of Danish

culture and society. And Rie is happy to help her with that.

Hend says that speaking Danish with Rie is completely different from practising Danish for her language classes, because they can talk about everything from raising children to their everyday studies and Danish and Syrian culture. Hend is open and curious, and laughs as she says she tends to ask a lot of questions – because that way, she learns more and becomes better at figuring things out for herself.

"You have to ask, and if someone helps and guides you, I say thank you, and then I know how to do it the next time."

- HEND

Neither Hend nor her husband have family members in Denmark, and Hend is therefore keen to build up a network around her children so that they can grow up with people of different ages around them. She has for example explained to the children that Rie is the same age as her youngest sister, who is still in Syria. Rie says she doesn't really see herself as a volunteer, because it makes it sound like a duty, and it's far from that: They are friends.

HOW ARE THE RESULTS ACHIEVED?

AT THE ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

Strong and well-established cooperation between the voluntary groups and the municipalities is important in determining whether the offer reaches the target group. **The evaluation shows that the municipalities are in general very satisfied with their cooperation with Friends Show The Way.** Several municipal employees report that the offer of volunteer friends for refugees creates added value for the municipalities' integration efforts.

"I hope and believe that we will get some citizens out of this who will have a more nuanced picture of what it means to be a citizen in Denmark (...) We have families who have made much more progress because they have had a really good volunteer who has supported them, and who has helped them look for work, and who has tirelessly again and again and again told the families: "Well, if the municipality says so, it's right, and you will improve your finances if you both get a job." In the long run, I think it makes a difference that there are people other than professionals who say something and act on it."

– MUNICIPAL REPRESENTATIVE

The evaluation shows that the volunteers are generally well equipped for the task, and challenges have not been experienced in the relationships. To ensure that volunteers are well prepared, the project offers a range of training courses, workshops and materials, as well as supervision, local group networking meetings, etc. The ongoing dialogue and sparring with regional consultants also plays an important role in supporting volunteer leaders in their tasks.

Many organisations of civil society have experienced difficulty in recruiting volunteers, particularly in recent years. The project therefore has a strong and ongoing focus not only on the recruitment of volunteers, but also on retaining them. **The evaluation shows that there are local differences in the adequacy of the volunteer capacity of Friends Show The Way.** While some places report a shortage of volunteers, in others the experience is that the need for volunteers is covered – and in some places even with a reserve to draw on.



THE ORGANISATION OF FRIENDS SHOW THE WAY

Friends Show The Way is organised on three levels:

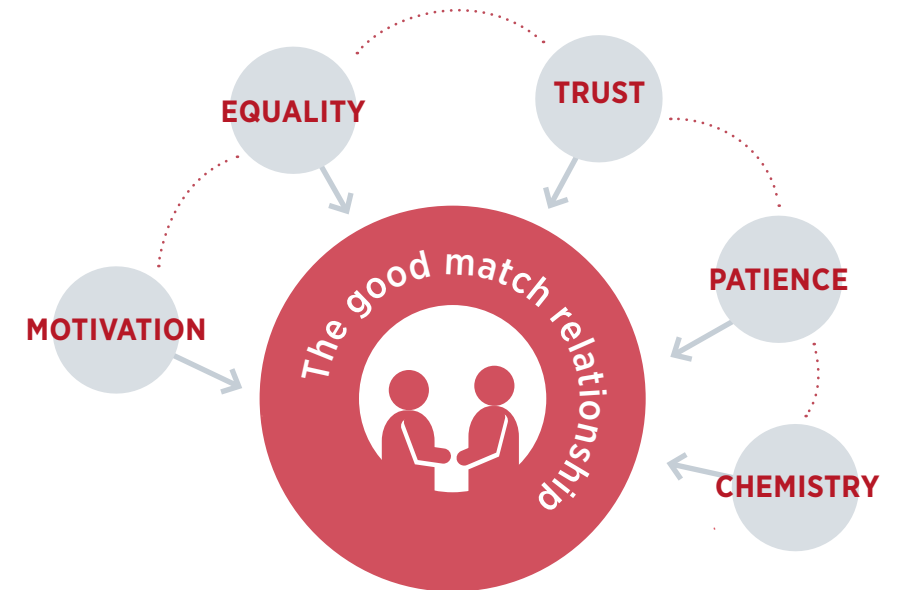
At the national level, the project is managed and facilitated via the Danish Refugee Council and the Red Cross through a joint project management consisting of a project manager, a project coordinator and two associated communication consultants, who amongst other things assist the volunteer groups with local volunteer recruitment, together with an analysis consultant and a student. A steering group has been set up consisting of representatives from the two organisations, as well as from the Ministry of Immigration and Integration, the Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration (SIRI) and Local Government Denmark (KL).

At the regional level, consultants employed by the Red Cross and the Danish Refugee Council, respectively, support the project's local volunteer leaders with professional sparring, knowledge sharing, network facilitation, skills enhancement courses, etc. In addition, the consultants participate in meetings with the municipality, the language school, etc., if the voluntary groups so request.

At the local level, volunteer managers take on coordination tasks, including recruiting and matching volunteers and refugees, working with the municipality and other partners, and organising local network meetings with volunteers.

A strategic investment in vulnerable neighbourhoods

The project aims to establish cooperation with social housing actors in vulnerable housing areas. The aim is to reach that part of the target group who have been in the country for a longer period of time and often live in these areas. Although cooperation has been successfully established in a number of areas, the evaluation shows that it has also been difficult for various reasons, including widespread 'project fatigue' in these areas, together with the Covid pandemic, which affected much of the project period. The evaluation also shows that this part of the target group is already being reached – just through other channels.



IN THE RELATIONSHIPS

The evaluation shows that it is the successful and good relationships that create the desired results. One of the reasons why the quality of the relationship is crucial is that some of the benefits of the friendship – such as improved Danish language skills – cannot be achieved in a short period of time. A good relationship also requires the building of trust and confidence. Volunteers and refugees must therefore be willing to continue the relationship over some time before any development can be expected.

The evaluation identifies five specific conditions or factors that create more or less favourable conditions for the initiative to achieve its objectives, when there is a match between the expectations and needs of the refugee and the volunteer.

MOTIVATION:

The desire to change or to see change, and the desire to engage in the relationship.

"It means a lot. It means she wants to do some things, and if I support her, she can get better conditions, and make progress and get a good life. It's great to see that she has some drive. It makes it easier to be me in the relationship."

– VOLUNTEER

EQUALITY:

The desire to change or to see change, and the desire to engage in the relationship.

"It means a lot. It means she wants to do some things, and if I support her, she can get better conditions, and make progress and get a good life. It's great to see that she has some drive. It makes it easier to be me in the relationship."

– VOLUNTEER

TRUST:

The experience of being able to trust and rely on the volunteers.

"When I call her, she answers the phone. I know she will. I can talk to her about anything."

– REFUGEE

PATIENCE:

Patience is important in terms of getting to know each other and being in a long-term relationship.

"Nobody understands each other at first, so it takes patience to build up a close relationship and a good friendship."

– REFUGEE

CHEMISTRY:

The chemistry between the volunteer and the refugee is an 'x' factor. It's hard to say what creates good chemistry, but if the parties experience mutual empathy, that's a distinct strength.

"It's a question of finding people who fit together. I like it when it's calm. Someone who is patient with me, someone who tries to understand me. Others may want something different, or for something more to happen. Of course it's different from person to person, but I really like Lise and we go well together."

– REFUGEE

YOHANNA AND BEREKET & CONNY AND HENRIK



"I really want to learn the culture, the traditions, the language. Learn everything there is to know. But the problem is that I don't speak or understand the language."

- YOHANNA

Bereket came to Denmark from Eritrea in 2015, and in the following year he was joined by his wife Yohanna and their eldest son. Since then they have had two more daughters, and in 2019 they were matched with Henrik and Conny.

Bereket already spoke English and had a driving licence, so he quickly found work. He speaks Danish with his colleagues, listens to Danish radio while driving, and watches Danish news on TV. Yohanna has been differently challenged. With two pregnancies since she arrived in the country, both her language learning and her job hunting have been put on hold at times.

When Henrik and Conny visit, Henrik typically practises Danish with Yohanna. At first she had to be persuaded a bit, but she has grown less shy as her Danish gets better. Conny and Henrik helped her to enrol in IGU (the Basic Integration Training Programme) and talked about her possibly taking a Social and Health Care Assistant course afterwards. They all agreed that she would thrive and be good at this type of work.

Instead, Yohanna was offered a job at a furniture factory, which she is happy with. However, the majority of her colleagues are foreigners, including other Eritreans, so she doesn't speak much Danish during her working day. She is happy to be able to contribute to the family's income, but she also feels that it has an impact on her language learning. It has therefore become even more important for her to practise Danish with her volunteer friends when they meet.

"I don't have much contact [with Danes]. I don't speak much Danish."

- YOHANNA

In addition, the children have a pair of backup 'grandparents' in Henrik and Conny, who have helped the children with their homework, taken them to Legoland and helped them sign up for soccer. The children are very fond of Henrik and Conny, who are just as fond of them, and the parents are very happy about that.

The image features a solid red background. In the lower half, there are several stylized human figures of varying heights and widths, rendered in a lighter shade of red. These figures are composed of simple rounded shapes for heads and bodies, creating a sense of a diverse group of people.

You can read more about
the project and find the
full evaluation at:
VennerViserVej.dk