



From assistance to agency: Enhancing the UK resettlement scheme for lasting integration

This policy brief presents findings from the research "The Importance of Social Networks amongst Refugees Resettled through the Community Sponsorship Scheme and the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme", conducted at the University of Birmingham (2020–2024). The study explored the role of social networks in refugee integration under two key UK programmes: the Community Sponsorship Scheme (CS) and the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), which has since been replaced by the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS).

Using a comparative mixed-methods design, the research drew on in-depth interviews with 23 refugees—10 resettled through CS and 13 through VPRS. Employing social network analysis and the Indicators of Integration Framework, the study examined how different types of social relationships and the resources exchanged through them shape refugees' integration processes in the UK. It revealed significant differences between the social networks developed under the two schemes, offering critical insights into how programme design and support structures influence social connection, emotional wellbeing, and access to opportunities for resettled refugees.

Key Comparative Findings

- Broader social networks in Community Sponsorship:** CS refugees developed wider, more diverse and supportive networks, thanks to their close relationships with volunteer sponsors. These networks offered tailored emotional and practical support, enhancing refugees' sense of belonging, confidence, and reciprocity.
- Structured but limited networks in VPRS:** Refugees supported by local authorities and

caseworkers under VPRS received reliable formal assistance, particularly during their initial resettlement phase, but their social networks were smaller and less diverse, often confined to professional relationships.

- Emotional versus structural outcomes:** Although CS participants reported stronger social and emotional connections, these did not always translate into better outcomes in employment, housing, or language acquisition. Social networks alone could not overcome systemic barriers such as limited ESOL provision, housing insecurity, or restricted labour market access.
- The quality of relationships matters:** Caring, trust-based, and reciprocal relationships, rather than a high number of connections, were the most significant factors facilitating successful integration.
- Integration as a shared, multi-directional process:** Effective integration requires the collaboration of multiple stakeholders—refugees, volunteers, local authorities, civil society, and government—working together to address both relational and structural needs.

Purpose of this Policy Brief

This brief provides evidence-based recommendations to strengthen the UKRS and other government-led refugee resettlement programmes that continue the legacy of VPRS. It is intended for policymakers in the Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG), Housing and Communities, as well as for local authorities, third-sector organisations, and service providers involved in refugee reception and integration. Drawing on comparative research findings, it highlights opportunities to enhance coordination, caseworker capacity, and social connection across local resettlement delivery, and to inform best practices for effective, rights-based refugee integration in the UK.

The UKRS continues the legacy of the VPRS, providing protection and initial support to vulnerable refugees. While it delivers structured and reliable assistance, findings indicate that integration outcomes could be improved through greater investment in social connection, caseworker capacity, and collaboration with civil society.

Key Findings

- VPRS refugees benefited from consistent, professional assistance but lacked opportunities for informal social engagement.
- VPRS caseworkers faced high caseloads (5–15 families), limiting capacity for personalised support.
- Refugees experienced challenges accessing housing, ESOL, and employment, particularly after the first year.
- Partnerships with community groups were fragmented and inconsistent across local authorities.
- Refugees' smaller networks contributed to social isolation and slower integration despite functional progress.

Contact

For further information, contact **Dr Gabriella D'Avino**. Research Associate, Law School, The Open University. gabriella.davino@open.ac.uk

Policy Recommendations

1. Prioritise Social Connection in Resettlement Policy

- Embed social network development (e.g. mentorship, peer matching, community events) into local authority resettlement plans.
- Fund community connectors to link refugees with local residents, employers, and organisations.

2. Strengthen Local Authority Capacity

- Fund additional caseworkers to reduce caseloads and ensure consistent contact and continuity of support.
- Integrate mental health and wellbeing services into early-stage resettlement.
- Guarantee long-term access to ESOL, childcare, and housing support beyond the first year.

3. Institutionalise Collaboration with Civil Society

- Formalise partnerships between councils and community groups to combine professional and volunteer support.
- Incentivise co-created local integration plans involving councils, NGOs, and refugee communities.

4. Extend and Tailor Support Beyond Year One

- Provide flexible, needs-based funding for families requiring extended integration assistance.
- Introduce hybrid or "second-year" sponsorship models, linking resettled refugees with CS groups for sustained community support.

5. Reaffirm a Rights-Based Approach

- Ensure access to integration services regardless of refugees' route of entry.
- Frame UKRS and related schemes as mechanisms of protection and inclusion, not as tools of migration control.

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