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Institute for Research into
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Public attitudes to refugee sponsorship in the UK

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Authorship

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Glossary

Community Sponsorship: CS
Homes for Ukraine: H4U
Communities for Afghans: CfA
General Public Diverse: DPD
General Public Less-Diverse: GPLD



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Executive summary

This report presents findings from a qualitative study of public attitudes towards refugee sponsorship in the UK, based on 30 interviews conducted in both diverse and less-diverse communities across the West Midlands and the Southwest of England. The research explored levels of awareness, understanding and support among people not directly involved in sponsorship schemes. Overall awareness of sponsorship was limited and uneven. *Homes for Ukraine* was relatively well recognised, whereas *Community Sponsorship* and *Communities for Afghans* were largely unfamiliar to participants. Where sponsorship was recognised, understanding was often partial and shaped by media narratives and wider debates on immigration and asylum. While attitudes towards refugees were generally sympathetic and support for sponsorship was expressed, concerns emerged around fairness, local capacity and pressures on public services and housing. Participants emphasised the need for clearer communication, greater transparency about how schemes operate, and visible support for host communities.

The findings indicate that public support for refugee sponsorship is present but conditional. Sustained expansion of sponsorship-based resettlement in the UK will depend on building confidence in the fairness, capacity and effective delivery of these schemes.

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Section 1:

Introduction

This report examines how refugee sponsorship is understood among members of the UK public, focusing on levels of awareness of existing schemes, attitudes toward sponsorship, and willingness to engage in sponsorship activities.

The UK operates three refugee sponsorship schemes, enabling communities, households, and civil society organisations to play a direct role in supporting resettled refugees. The Community Sponsorship (CS) scheme, launched in 2016, allows community groups to take responsibility for resettling refugee families, including securing housing and providing integration support. More recently, two additional schemes have been introduced. Homes for Ukraine (H4U), introduced in 2022 following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, enables individual households to host displaced Ukrainians, with 'thank-you' payments for hosts and funding for local authorities. Communities for Afghans (CfA), piloted in 2024, supports Afghans evacuated under the Afghan Resettlement Programme, many of whom had been living in hotels. Unlike CS, CfA does not require community fundraising, though groups must secure self-contained accommodation. Across all three schemes, sponsored refugees are granted access to welfare, healthcare, education, and the labour market. The scale and reach of sponsorship in the UK remain uneven. CS has resettled approximately 1,100 people and the CfA pilot fewer than 100, while H4U enabled over 170,000 arrivals. Unlike CS and CfA wherein refugees either have permanent leave to remain or a pathway to permanence, H4U refugees only have temporary, renewable status.

The UK Government's *Restoring Order and Control: A statement on the Government's asylum and returns policy* (November 2025), signalled an intention to make 'community sponsorship the norm' within a reconfigured asylum system, emphasising an expanded role for communities in refugee reception and support. As sponsorship becomes more prominent, public understanding of the approach, particularly among those not already involved, will be critical to its future development. However, little is known about how the wider public perceives sponsorship, despite the fact that these views are likely to shape both the scope of future expansion and the long-term sustainability of such schemes.

To address this gap in knowledge, a University of Birmingham study conducted between January and August 2025 undertook 30 on-the-spot interviews with members of the public in the West Midlands and the Southwest of England. This report presents the findings from this study. The following section outlines the methods used while Section Three examines public awareness and understanding of sponsorship. Section Four explores public attitudes toward sponsorship and willingness to participate. Section Five summarises public suggestions for improving sponsorship, and Section Six considers the broader implications of the findings.

Section 2:

Methods

This report draws on interviews conducted with members of the general public living in diverse and less-diverse areas of the West Midlands and the Southwest, selected for their contrasting levels of ethnic diversity, as measured by Census 2021 data. Diverse urban locations included neighbourhoods across Birmingham, such as Moseley, Sparkbrook, Balsall Heath, Nechells, Lozells, Birmingham city centre, and Cannon Hill Park. Less-diverse locations included towns and rural or coastal areas in Devon and Worcestershire, including Sidmouth, Exeter, Chagford, Coplestone, Eggesford, Malvern Hills, Worcester, Bideford, and Westward Ho!.

Interviewees were recruited through on-the-spot intercept interviews in public settings, including train stations, city centre streets, libraries, parks, pubs, cafés, charity shops, and the seafront. Interviews lasted 5–10 minutes and explored awareness of, and attitudes towards, refugee sponsorship.

Seventeen men and thirteen women (30 in total) aged 18 and over were interviewed. Six were aged 18–24, five 25–39, twelve 40–59, and seven were aged 60 years or

above. Most interviewees identified as White (23), with two identifying as Asian/Asian British and five as Black (including Black British/ Caribbean or African). Thirty-six individuals declined to participate, most commonly citing a lack of time or interest. Nine explicitly stated they did not want to discuss refugees, with six expressing this in hostile terms.

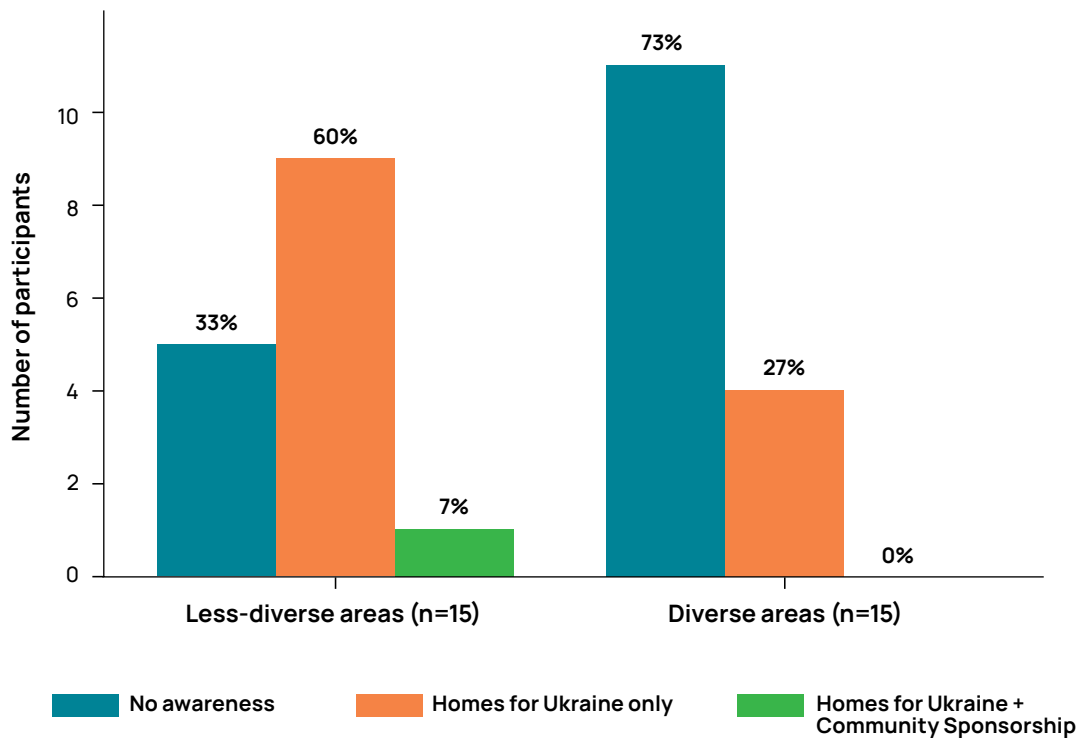
Ethical approval for the interviews was granted by the University of Birmingham's Ethical Review Committee.

Section 3:

Awareness and understanding of sponsorship

Public awareness of refugee sponsorship was limited. Over half of those interviewed (16) were unaware of any UK sponsorship schemes. No interviewee was aware of CfA. In less-diverse areas, nine interviewees had heard of H4U but few knew of CS and five were unaware of any schemes. The only participant aware of both H4U and CS was interviewed in a less-diverse area. Awareness of sponsorship was lower in diverse areas: 11 interviewees knew of no schemes, and four had only heard of H4U, with none aware of CS (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Awareness of refugee sponsorship schemes by area type



Although some interviewees had heard of H4U, their understanding of the scheme was uneven. Interviewees recalled hearing about hosting when the scheme was introduced but were unclear how it operated, who was responsible, or how it differed from other forms of refugee support. Information about H4U came from social or mainstream media, or informal conversations. Several interviewees reported encountering fragmented or second-hand information, leading to uncertainty about its accuracy.

Sponsorship was frequently conflated with wider debates about asylum and irregular migration. As one interviewee noted:

“ We’re in a situation where there’s a lot of debate... around refugees and it gets mixed up with debates around immigration and indeed illegal immigration... it all gets mixed up together.
(White, Male, 40-59, Moseley)

Section 4:

How the public views sponsorship

Interviewees often framed their views on sponsorship in terms of deservingness and fairness, and concerns about balancing refugees' needs with those of local people. Although interviewees recognised that sponsorship could bring some benefits for their community their support tended to emphasise the need for refugee contribution and thus was somewhat conditional.

Concerns about resources

Interviewees in smaller towns and rural or coastal areas expressed concerns about sponsorship in terms of local capacity, saying that support depended on reassurance that schemes would not strain already stretched housing, welfare and public services:

“ **We're a small place. Resources are stretched as it is. People are kind, but they need to feel confident it won't add extra pressure.**
(White, Female, 40-59, Chagford)

These concerns were typically framed not as opposition to helping refugees, but as uncertainty about what to do when resources are limited:

“ **I'm not saying we shouldn't help, like, I get that some of them have had a hard time, I do. But it just feels like there's always more being done for them than for people here already, if that makes sense?**
(White, Female, 40-59, Sidmouth)

In more diverse areas, such concerns tended to be located within broader structural issues, including underfunded services and widening social inequalities. Interviewees emphasised the cumulative effects of austerity and how communities felt neglected:

“ **I guess also a lot of suspicion and fear that arise are just because communities are being forgotten and services are underfunded and that sort of thing, and people are struggling themselves with a ton of stuff.**
(White, Female, 18-24, Cannon Hill Park)

In general interviewees argued that sponsorship would be viewed more positively if the benefits to host communities were clear.

Conditionality and support

Interviewees' understandings of sponsorship reflected broader attitudes towards refugees, and differed depending on local context and ideas about difference and belonging. In diverse areas, especially in Birmingham, interviewees described diversity as routine so did not articulate any concerns about 'difference' signalling an openness to newcomers, even if knowledge of sponsorship schemes was limited.

Interviewees in less-diverse areas distinguished between refugee groups from different countries of origin, contrasting those perceived as working and “integrating” with others thought to rely on benefits or straining services. Where interviewees had limited direct contact with refugees, these distinctions reflected generalised or stereotypical assumptions, often shaped by media narratives and perceptions of cultural difference.

“ **Depends who, I suppose. I just feel like, when you see stuff on the telly - big groups of, like, Arab blokes turning up, you don't know where they've come from or what they're about.**
(White, Male, 18-24, Bideford)

Nonetheless, many interviewees expressed empathy towards refugees, acknowledging the difficulties of fleeing conflict and rebuilding their lives in a new country. This was particularly evident in more diverse areas, where resettlement was more likely to be understood as necessary and appropriate.

Interviewees identified potential benefits of sponsorship, particularly when schemes were perceived as small-scale and well-supported. These included economic contribution, cultural exchange, and positive impacts on community life. Employment featured prominently, especially in areas experiencing labour shortages:

“ There's loads of adverts for different jobs... care work, hospitality, trades... so yeah I guess maybe having new people come in who want to work, want to contribute, that's no bad thing.

(White, Male, 60+, Sidmouth)

Support for sponsorship was often conditional, expressed with expectations that refugees should work, integrate, and thus “contribute” economically or socially. Employment was repeatedly framed as a mechanism of reciprocity, benefiting both refugees and local communities.

“ Once you get into a situation is that when people do come here, then yes, they've got to work somehow. For their own good as well as obviously the community's good.

(White, Male, 60+, Birmingham City Centre)

In less-diverse areas, these expectations were more likely to be linked to local labour shortages, particularly in care, agriculture, and hospitality, with greater support for sponsorship if refugees were perceived as willing and able to fill these roles.

“ It's alright if it's for people like the Ukrainians... they're proper sound, hard-working, get stuck in. No problems at all.

(White, Male, 18-24, Bideford)

Willingness to participate in sponsorship

Although many interviewees supported sponsorship in principle, fewer expressed a willingness to engage directly, framing it as broadly positive but not necessarily a responsibility they would wish to take on. In more diverse areas, non-participation was often expressed in terms of practical constraints such as insufficient space to host refugees in their home and limited financial resources and time. In less-diverse areas, willingness to engage was shaped by concerns that communities were already facing hardship because of resource shortages so could not be further stretched. Some believed that responsibility should primarily lie with the Government rather than communities:

“ I think that's a Government thing really, and it's for them to sort it out.

(White, Male, 40-59, Malvern)

Those interested in supporting sponsorship typically favoured volunteering rather than hosting or taking on formal responsibilities.

Section 5:

Increasing interest in sponsorship

Interviewees identified four main ways to increase public engagement in refugee sponsorship.

Raising awareness about sponsorship as a practice

Interviewees called for clearer information about sponsorship, noting that limited knowledge generates misunderstandings and uncertainty. They stressed the need for awareness-raising using social and traditional media, local community spaces such as displaying posters in libraries, and with online platforms seen as offering opportunities to reach wider audiences, particularly younger people. Interviewees emphasised the importance of the provision of highly visible information, instead of relying on individuals to find information by themselves.

Clear information about the specificities of sponsorship

Interviewees emphasised the need for clear information about what sponsorship involves, addressing uncertainties around responsibilities, costs, and expectations. Interviewees also called for reassurance that schemes are fair and well managed, with details about safeguards and accountability also viewed as important.

“ I think the main thing would be to reassure people that the schemes are not being abused.
(White, Male, 40-59, Malvern)

Using real-life examples

Many interviewees felt that sponsorship should be communicated through concrete, human examples. The sharing of personal stories from both sponsors and refugees was viewed as an effective way of clarifying what sponsorship entails and making it tangible. However, some cautioned against overly positive portrayals, emphasising the importance of authentic accounts to build trust.

“ I'd say, be honest about the challenges, not just kind of nicey nicey bits.
(White, Female, 40-59, Chagford)

Emphasising benefits to host communities

Interviewees suggested sponsorship would be more attractive if clearly framed as benefiting host communities as well as refugees, with several emphasising the importance of making visible investments around sponsorship to reassure people that it would not strain local resources. Others highlighted the value of encouraging local dialogue around sponsorship. They suggested that institutions such as councils, churches, and community groups could help facilitate information-sharing and discussion.

Section 6:

Conclusions and Recommendations

This report has examined how refugee sponsorship is understood among members of the public. The findings indicate that public awareness of sponsorship remains limited and uneven, with H4U emerging as the widely recognised scheme. While attitudes toward sponsorship were generally sympathetic, support was frequently conditional and concerns were expressed about the availability of housing, pressures on public services, and the extent that refugees were able to contribute. Although many interviewees supported sponsorship in principle, fewer felt able or willing to engage directly, citing practical constraints and uncertainty about responsibilities.

The findings highlight both the potential for broader public engagement and the necessary conditions required to facilitate it. The following recommendations identify ways to increase public involvement in sponsorship.

Building public confidence in sponsorship

- Provide information about different sponsorship schemes and clearly differentiate sponsorship from asylum and other migration routes.
- Explain that sponsorship is a 'safe and legal route'.

Clarifying roles and accountability

- Outline the respective responsibilities of central Government, local authorities, delivery partners, and sponsors to reduce public uncertainty around accountability.
- Enhance transparency around oversight, safeguards, and governance arrangements to reinforce public confidence in the safety, fairness and effective management of schemes.
- Address concerns about responsibility being shifted onto communities by highlighting the shared role with Government.

Addressing concerns about resources

- Make visible Government investment in resources to support sponsorship in receiving areas to reduce concerns about competition over resources.
- Communicate the social, economic, and community benefits generated through sponsorship.

Promoting opportunities for public involvement

- Provide flexible, proportionate engagement opportunities clearly communicating the range of roles through which individuals can get involved.
- Introduce a skills-based matching platform to link potential volunteers with sponsorship groups based on their availability and expertise.

Endnotes

- ¹ The West Midlands is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in England (71.8% White British), with higher Asian (13.3%), Black (4.5%) and Mixed (3.0%) populations than the South West, which is among the least diverse regions (87.8% White British). UK Government (2024) Regional ethnic diversity. Available at: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest/> (Accessed: 28 December 2025).
- ² Exeter is Devon's most ethnically diverse city, yet Census 2021 data show 90.3% of residents identified as White British, compared with 97.8% in Mid Devon. Exeter is less-diverse than other major UK cities. Office for National Statistics (2023) Ethnic group by local authority: Census 2021 – Exeter. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E07000041/> (Accessed: 28 December 2025).
- ³ Malvern Hills is in the West Midlands but demographically homogenous, with 96.6% of residents identifying as White British (Census 2021), so is treated as a less-diverse local context. Office for National Statistics (2023) Ethnic group by local authority: Census 2021 – Malvern Hills. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E07000235/> (Accessed: 28 December 2025).
- ⁴ Worcester, also in the West Midlands, recorded a White British population of 90.0% in Census 2021 and is treated as a less-diverse urban context. Office for National Statistics (2023) Ethnic group by local authority: Census 2021 – Worcester. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E07000237/> (Accessed: 28 December 2025).
- ⁵ Interviewees were asked to self-identify using the five broad UK Census ethnicity categories (White British; Asian or Asian British; Black, Black British, Caribbean or African; Mixed or multiple ethnic groups; Other ethnic group). No further detail was collected on specific ethnic background, nationality, or migration status. As interviews were on-the-spot conversations with members of the general public, more detailed socio-demographic questions were considered potentially intrusive.

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