

Expectations and understanding of Community Sponsorship before refugee arrival

The Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS) was introduced in the UK in July 2016 enabling community groups to support the resettlement of refugees. In late 2017 the Institute for Research into Superdiversity (IRiS), at the University of Birmingham, commenced a formative evaluation of the CSS. Between 2017 and March 2020 IRiS has undertaken a total of 250 interviews. These included 61 with refugees, 145 with CSS volunteers and 32 with wider community members in CSS areas. The evaluation involved 22 groups in rural and urban areas in all four countries of the UK. This briefing draws on the findings from the evaluation.

Both refugee and volunteer respondents have a number of expectations which shape their ability to get the most out of the CSS. Refugees have expectations about the UK, everyday life here and ability to reunite with and visit their loved ones. Volunteers have expectations about the nature of the experiences refugees will have had and about what is feasible in terms of integration upon arrival in the UK. The provision of accurate pre-arrival information is important to support refugee integration. This briefing explores the different expectations and outlines areas where further information and preparation would be helpful.

Refugee respondents

It was evident from the evaluation that a number of refugees had not received, or understood, enough information in advance of arrival, especially in terms of UK culture, access to work

and the type of areas to which they were being settled. Some refugees were disappointed or frustrated about certain aspects of life in the UK, and volunteers struggled to manage expectations. Gaps in knowledge included:

- Limited information about the CSS, how it works and how it differs from other resettlement schemes that host refugees in the UK. This can be problematic if refugees make comparisons about the types of support received by refugees resettled on different schemes.
- Lack of awareness about the specific area to which they were moving, for example, not realising they are relocating to places with no other Arabic speakers and limited transportation and employment opportunities.
- Not appreciating that learning English is necessary in order to get a job and that it can take a long time to reach the standard needed to seek work.

- Not understanding that securing employment is challenging and that a return to former careers is unlikely.
- Limited understanding of the benefit system and entitlements – both that they will be reliant on welfare until able to secure employment and that they will need to manage on a very tight budget.
- Limited information about family reunification and the possibility of visiting family overseas.
- Lack of understanding about the geography of Europe and the UK. Many refugees thought of the West (including sometimes Canada and the United States of America) as one country and did not realise how far apart they are. In one example, refugees thought that UK and Denmark were cities within the country of “Europe”. Finding out how difficult it would be to visit family members elsewhere in Europe was a shock and deeply upsetting after years of separation.

Open and honest conversations were needed at the early stages of resettlement to explain the constraints of the CSS, as well as the many benefits it brings, so that refugees could understand what to expect.

Volunteer respondents

Volunteers in several groups felt unprepared for the extent of cultural differences that they encountered (see quote below), and the amount of time needed to support refugees both to settle in the first instance and then to integrate. They found that refugee families were much less prepared for life in the UK than they expected. Volunteers said the pre-arrival information they received about the family was not sufficient to facilitate adequate understanding of the specific needs of the family. There were, for example, differences based on region, cultures and aspects of religion, and also in the flight and refuge experiences of families, which shaped their needs once in the UK. Groups needed more information about adults' levels

of education and literacy in order to plan better for language learning.

“ We were very much led to believe by the Home Office that there was this fairly structured preparation programme that would be delivered by the IOM or the UNHCR over three days – we were given a three-day curriculum that they were supposed to have had delivered. When the refugee family first arrived we kind of assumed that that had taken place. I mean it didn't take us very long to start realising that a lot of this preparation hadn't happened. ”
Rural group

Groups had originally understood that the timeframe to independence would correlate with the 12 month support period and soon realised that this was not feasible. They were surprised by how long it took refugees to learn English and to access work. They lacked knowledge about how to enable independence and questioned the decisions they made around provision of support, worrying that they were doing something wrong, and unaware that refugee independence often takes years.

There is further scope to support groups to have a realistic sense of the challenges involved in refugee integration. Also, more thorough preparation work could be undertaken to ensure that refugees know what to expect on arrival in the UK. Peer group support was said to help encourage and motivate volunteers. It enabled access to practical advice on managing volunteers' expectations, how to work as a team and to learn detailed information about the history, culture and traditions of the Middle East.

Cultural awareness

A recurring issue was the lack of understanding among some volunteers, and the refugees they supported, of the differences in Middle Eastern and British cultures. These gaps in knowledge could undermine the development of strong and trusting relationships between volunteers and refugee adults. For example, refugee respondents, used to an open-door lifestyle, where friends and family could drop in and share food and drinks any time, felt isolated and sometimes abandoned if the volunteers did not often visit them at home. Some refugees were uncomfortable with UK norms regarding keeping animals inside houses and some volunteers struggled to accept refugees' parenting style. Many volunteers felt uncomfortable with what they saw as unequal gender relations. Examples were given where men would not seek help from women volunteers, and the lack of male volunteers in some CSS groups could be problematic. Some women refugees would not speak with male interpreters about medical needs and healthcare.

Mistakes were made because volunteers appeared to lack the confidence to ask refugees about their culture, beliefs and needs, preferring instead to ask advice of interpreters or muddle through. This was unfortunate, as interpreters sometimes shared incorrect information, and many refugees interviewed said they would be happy to answer questions and explain practices, such as wearing the hijab or fasting. CSS volunteers and families needed to be encouraged to be as transparent as possible with each other about gaps in their knowledge. Those volunteers who engaged with refugees and learned about their culture and way of life reported this learning as one of the highlights of their involvement in CSS.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Prior to resettlement refugees should receive:**
 - Clear information about the CSS, what it means to be resettled under the scheme, and how it differs from other schemes.
- Detailed information about the onward location, including information about the area of the UK relative to mainland Europe, the nature of the relocation setting, such as the facilities available and profile of the local population.
- Information about the necessity of learning English before accessing work and typical timescales for doing so.
- Information about the challenges of applying for family reunion and visiting family elsewhere in Europe.
- **Refugee families should be told that they can turn down a placement if they feel it is not suitable and be assured that other placements will be offered.**
- **All information provided to refugees prior to arrival should be available in a range of formats, including written, audio and video, in refugees' primary languages.**
- **Those providing the above information should take steps to ensure that pre-departure information has been understood.**
- **Training for volunteers should include a realistic overview of the approximate levels of volunteer time commitment likely to be needed and the extent of support refugees will require.**
- **Training from Reset to CSS groups should include:**
 - A clear account of the challenges associated with refugee integration, for example, how long it can take to speak English well enough to be able to communicate and seek work.
 - Signposting to sources of advice to assist refugees to apply for travel documents.
 - Information about some of the challenges refugee families may face on arrival, including isolation and the impact of conflict and trauma, and where to find resources to address them.

- Follow up notes from training sessions, including links to resources, enabling further learning about Middle Eastern history, culture, gender relations and religious practices.
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View the three Community Sponsorship Scheme evaluation reports:

Full CSS report [www.birmingham.ac.uk/
communitysponsorshipevaluation](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/communitysponsorshipevaluation)

Refugee perspectives report [www.birmingham.
ac.uk/refugeesoncommunitysponsorship](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/refugeesoncommunitysponsorship)

Wider impacts report [www.birmingham.ac.uk/
widerimpactscommunitysponsorship](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/widerimpactscommunitysponsorship)