

Improving the UK's Community Sponsorship Scheme

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, 12 with thought leaders who were engaged in sponsorship from the outset of the scheme 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.

Formation of groups and application process

Successful CSS groups combined strong leadership with the ability to allocate tasks to a range of volunteers with the right skills and expertise. Groups typically included a 'core' of two or three volunteers and a group leader, as well as 'sub-teams' of volunteers with the requisite skills, experience and networks to lead on housing, education, health and finance related tasks. Volunteers who were able to offer ad-hoc support with short term activities were also welcomed. Groups that included volunteers with experience of working with refugees and asylum seekers were particularly effective.

Connections made with other more experienced CSS groups were seen as very valuable. Their help was found to be particularly important at the application stage of the process. However, volunteers told us about other useful assistance they had received around matters such as long-term integration and problem solving.

Many refugee respondents praised the support they received from CSS groups with volunteers who had healthcare backgrounds. Volunteers' knowledge ensured they were able to help refugees navigate the healthcare system in a relatively straightforward way which was particularly important for those with complex health problems.

The gender and age of volunteers were important. Most CSS groups comprised mainly of retired women with a professional or semi-professional background. Women refugees valued the relationships they built with women volunteers and found that they could easily work with them to access health, social care, and language learning. Some volunteers and refugees spoke of the development of kin-like relations which spanned generations. However male refugees sought the company and support of other males. The absence of a male figure within the sponsor group could hinder integration processes leaving men feeling isolated. While refugees and volunteers talked of becoming friends, refugees lamented the lack of volunteers of their own age to connect

with. Teenagers could feel isolated as, when they joined their new school, social groups were already well-formed.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Increased regional networking opportunities for CSS groups could be put in place, and (data protection allowing) a list of CSS groups could be established for each region and shared via the Strategic Migration Partnerships.**
- **CSS groups should try to ensure they recruit volunteers of mixed genders and ages.**

Matching

Once a CSS group receives approval, the Home Office provides a limited number of group members and their local authority with medical and case notes about a refugee family, so that they can assess whether they are able to meet the family's needs. Groups agree to accept the proposed family if they feel they can meet their needs.

Once accepted by the group and local authority, the refugee family was offered the resettlement place and given some information about the area in which the group is located.¹ Refugee families did not appear to have a meaningful opportunity to assess whether resettlement to a particular area was right for them. No refugees interviewed said they had any knowledge about the location before they agreed to resettlement, and many said they were surprised to find themselves in areas without other people from the Middle East, or access to work. Both refugees and volunteers had little understanding of what happens if they turn down a resettlement opportunity and how long it might take to receive another offer.

“No, we didn't know anything. We didn't even know where we were heading to or what to expect. But

we accepted because of the situation we were in.”
Rural refugee, male

A lack of appropriate 'matching' can hinder a family's ability to settle. Some families came from urban areas and were surprised to find that the location they were resettled into was remote, with limited access to services and other people 'like me'.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **More information should be gathered about refugees' preferences to inform placement decisions.**
- **Refugees should be informed about the nature of the CSS scheme and given full information about the proposed resettlement area. Refugees should be assured that they will be offered other opportunities if they feel that a placement is unsuitable.**
- **Groups, and possibly local authorities, should be encouraged to think about their responsibility to assess how well a family will suit their location. They should be encouraged to turn down potentially poor matches while being reassured that the family will be resettled elsewhere.**

Ongoing support

Despite the extensive planning, CSS groups generally found the first three months after the family's arrival to be challenging. Completing the paperwork associated with tenancy agreements and claiming benefits was a huge task for volunteers and refugees, many of whom had not come across such bureaucracy before. Groups also faced bureaucratic hurdles such as difficulties fulfilling the evidence requirements to open bank accounts or barriers to registering with a local GP. Volunteers were unprepared for the extent of support necessary for refugees with health problems. This could

¹ See <https://training-resetuk.org/toolkit/working-with-refugees/planning-arrival/preparing-fact-sheet-family-you-will-support>

involve multiple weekly appointments with associated childcare, transport and support during appointments, with each visit potentially requiring three volunteers.

All but two groups received support from the Home Office when the family arrived at the airport which they found particularly helpful. Others reported receiving useful support from the Home Office in terms of facilitating engagement with, for example, job centres and local authorities, although this was inconsistent.

On the whole, volunteers said that volunteering for a CSS group was one of the most rewarding things that they had ever done. However, in the longer term, the intensity of the responsibility could exceed expectations and lead to a risk of burnout, especially if tasks were not properly delegated. Volunteers needed to find a balance between meeting refugees' needs and their own personal time and wellbeing. They sometimes struggled to agree within the group on how and when to step back and give the family more independence.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **The Home Office should set out what support it can and cannot provide to CSS groups.**
- **As the Home Office no longer goes to the airport to meet the new family, groups should consult Reset's glossary to check which documents will be needed (<https://training-resetuk.org/glossary>).**
- **An advice line, staffed by individuals with in-depth knowledge and practical experience of all aspects of community sponsorship, should provide ongoing support to CSS groups (currently provided by Reset).**

Community sponsorship and the role of local authorities

Collaborative working relationships with local authorities are essential for community groups.² Local authority consent is required for each CSS arrangement, giving authorities the opportunity to consider whether local services can meet refugee needs, such as availability of school places, and whether resettlement will impact on community cohesion.

Local authorities should allocate a lead officer, able to liaise on resettlement with the Home Office and the Strategic Migration Partnership. However, a number of groups highlighted challenges in engaging with their local authority and delays in obtaining approval. This appeared to be more complicated in local authorities that are two-tier, with county and district councils, rather than unitary authorities. Local authorities with insufficient knowledge of the CSS were nervous about committing to it. In some areas there was a lack of understanding about the differences between CSS and the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) for which the authority has more responsibility. In other areas, CSS groups benefited from the resources, services and networks provided by local authorities to their communities.

Some local authorities with VPRS refugee populations extended the benefits they provided to CSS refugees. Groups received help in the form of printed information, with practical advice about supporting refugees and information about services written in Arabic, as well as the loan of a minibus for collecting families from the airport and the provision of library cards and bus passes. The groups also received support with free Arabic interpretation when refugees had official appointments. Some nurseries and primary schools received grants for hiring part-time Arabic Teaching Assistants and produced books and reading material in Arabic and English. Finally, group leaders were connected by local authorities with networks of

² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/764991/2018-12-01_Community_Sponsorship_LA_guidance.pdf

local charities and organisations specialising in supporting refugees and promoting social cohesion.

More could be done to develop links between the CSS and other resettlement schemes, both in terms of sharing resources and also CSS groups providing other resettled refugees with additional support. However, a lack of joined-up working and information-sharing issues could prevent this from taking place.

Good practice

The VPRS Consortium was created by the Northern Ireland (NI) Executive Office and the Department of Communities to address all practical aspects of the resettlement process of the Syrian refugees in NI. The consortium brings together certain departments of the NI government (education, NI housing, welfare service) and six local charities that support refugees and their integration.

The CSS group in Northern Ireland received resources and support from the consortium. These included guidance on security, refugee awareness campaigns and training, community cohesion, and an invitation to social groups for connecting the refugee family they supported with other Syrian refugees in the area.

challenges and achieving economies of scale in commissioning services and support.

- **Local authorities supporting resettled refugees should share resources and support provision with CSS groups.**

View the three Community Sponsorship Scheme evaluation reports:

Full CSS report www.birmingham.ac.uk/communitysponsorshipevaluation

Refugee perspectives report www.birmingham.ac.uk/refugeesoncommunitysponsorship

Wider impacts report www.birmingham.ac.uk/widerimpactscommunitysponsorship

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **The Home Office should improve the flow of information to local authorities about the different resettlement schemes, ensuring it reaches the right people.**
- **The Strategic Migration Partnerships could offer a liaison role, helping to identify a named contact with responsibility for CSS in local authorities.**
- **Regional coordination through Strategic Migration Partnerships should be used to strengthen local authority capacity by developing solutions for common**