

# Community Sponsorship refugee and integration

**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 include 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 policy briefing draws on the findings from the evaluation.**

Integration is a long-term, multi-dimensional process, as recently set out in the Home Office Indicators of Integration framework 2019.<sup>1</sup> A key objective of community sponsorship and resettlement programmes generally is to provide support to facilitate refugee integration. Data collected in Canadian research shows improved long term integration outcomes for refugees resettled through sponsorship.<sup>2</sup> Our evaluation provided clear evidence that volunteers supported refugees in multiple areas such as accessing education, health and welfare. This briefing looks at some of the challenges faced by refugees and volunteers in the integration indicators areas of work, language, social connections and family reunification.

interviewed expressed their ambition to achieve economic independence through accessing work, with many expecting that they would be employed on arrival in the UK. Respondents had previously worked in a wide range of roles including as plumbers, technicians, electricians, gardeners, hairdressers, chefs and teachers and wanted to return to this work either through retraining or requalification. Others wished to start their own businesses. However, respondents were surprised and disappointed at how difficult it was to secure a job without being able to speak English well. Even those able to speak English to a high standard struggled to convert their qualifications into UK equivalents and access employment. Inability to be financially independent undermined male refugees' self-esteem leaving some feeling depressed and "hopeless".

## Work and financial independence

Getting a job was a key challenge for adult refugees. All adult male refugee respondents

“ Here I feel a new type of pain and distraught I do not feel like a man anymore, I mean I don't feel like I can look after my own family this is

<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019>

<sup>2</sup> Hynie, M. and J. Hyndman (2016) 'From Newcomer to Canadian: Making Refugee Integration Work' Policy Options

because I feel like a human  
that has expired and useless.”  
Male, 14 months in UK, less  
diverse area

Groups felt the best way for refugees to begin to build refugee employability was to engage them in volunteering to help gain work experience and provide an opportunity to practice English. Refugees from four groups volunteered in roles at local charities identified by CSS volunteers. Groups received limited support from Jobcentre Plus to identify work placements.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Pre-departure briefings should manage refugees' expectations about the time it takes to access work, the necessity of learning English and the difficulty of returning to previous professions/ trades.**
- **Reset has produced extensive guidance on accessing employment.<sup>3</sup> Volunteers should be made aware of this and also offered more extensive training on how to help refugees gain work after the group has received a family.**
- **CSS groups should consider involving an employer or a representative from an employability organisation in the core group to help use their networks to identify employment and volunteering opportunities.**
- **The Home Office should explore working with existing apprenticeship and employment schemes to further encourage employers to offer opportunities to refugees.**

## Language and communication

The ability to speak English is a vital 'facilitator' of integration. The majority of refugees interviewed were trying very hard to learn English.

Families with a good command of English found resettlement easier in the early months than those without, as they could communicate well with volunteers and be more self-sufficient generally. However, for many refugee adults, learning English was a challenge and a lack of communication skills made accessing training and work and developing a relationship with sponsors and the wider community difficult.

Most refugee families were enrolled in ESOL classes at local colleges. However, volunteers identified problems in the ESOL curriculum and with ESOL provision. Lessons worked on the assumption that students are literate in own language, are used to structured learning, are IT literate and have acquired some basic English. ESOL classes were often unavailable in rural areas or for those who did not arrive before the start of the academic term.

Some groups appeared unprepared for refugees' lack of language ability, their lack of literacy in Arabic, and the amount of time it took for refugees to learn English. Refugee adults who were unable to progress in their English skills were found to be heavily reliant on their group's support even after two years in the UK. This was frustrating for volunteers and refugees alike.

Several groups employed their own qualified ESOL teachers while others attended training to learn how to teach English themselves and offered tailored one to one sessions which refugee respondents reported finding more beneficial than attending ESOL classes. Inequalities were evident in the level of refugees' digital skills with women, older people, and those with low levels of education struggling to use digital resources.

## Recommendations:

- **Refugees should be advised before they come to the UK that they will need to learn English before accessing work and that this could be a lengthy process.**
- **More information should be provided to CSS groups prior to arrival about family members' level of education and English**

<sup>3</sup> <https://training.resetuk.org/toolkit/working-with-refugees/answering-key-questions/accessing-employment>

**ability so that they can plan targeted English language provision, and one to one support with basic literacy and numeracy where needed.**

- **Local authorities with resettled refugee populations should share ESOL resources and provision with CSS groups.**
- **Volunteers should ensure that refugees have adequate access to digital equipment and the skills to use it, paying particular attention to those with low levels of education.**

## Social connections

Social connections are at the heart of Community Sponsorship and essential for aiding integration. In many cases we found that refugees were supported to build connections through schools, local community and faith-based groups and that these connections helped to improve language proficiency.

Social connections are also important for refugee well-being.<sup>4</sup> The evaluation found that loneliness and isolation could be particularly acute for the families living in small communities especially where there were no other refugee families or Arabic speakers nearby.

“ *My biggest problem here is being in an isolated place, no halal food that is close, no friends no Arabs and Syrians, feeling trapped and depressed.* ”  
Rural refugee, female

Many respondents came from a tradition of hospitality and were keen to entertain volunteers and neighbours. They were disappointed to find that open door, spontaneous socialising was not typical in the UK and felt their social lives to be somewhat empty. Both refugees and volunteers expressed joy at evolving relationships that became kin-like and said they enjoyed socialising across generations. Many refugees expressed delight at going out

to parks, having picnics, and sharing meals with sponsors, which had a positive impact on their wellbeing and provided opportunities to make friends.

By comparison, some refugees described their relationships with volunteers as more of a service provider relationship due to the lack of emotional support and connections.

All refugees expressed a desire for friendships with both “British” people (which generally meant white people) and other Arabs from a similar class background as themselves. Gender and age were important when it came to meaningful friendships with women finding it easier to make connections with volunteers than men, largely because most volunteers are women. Teenagers were said to struggle to develop friendships at school because many social groups were already well established. Families in less diverse areas were able develop friendships through meeting people in ESOL classes, schools and baby and toddler groups and other refugee families contacted through social media.

Refugee adults who were unable to develop meaningful friendships within 12 months struggled to believe that they might make more friends, settle down and feel at home which added to a growing sense of isolation and exclusion. Some groups had tried to matchmake friendships between the refugees they supported and other refugees or Muslims with varying degrees of success. It was evident that some volunteers did not understand the diversity of Arab culture and could sometimes make inappropriate matches.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **CSS groups should recognise the importance of including male volunteers and younger volunteers within their groups.**
- **Social life is very important to refugee integration. CSS groups should consider dropping in to visit refugees, arranging community events and leisure activities**

<sup>4</sup> Cheung, S.Y. and Phillimore, J., 2013. Social networks, social capital and refugee integration. Report for Nuffield Foundation: London.

**as important ways to help refugees to connect with local people.**

- **When refugee adults are isolated volunteers should work with them to explore ways to help build a network and discuss the kinds of connections they would like to make. Introductions to other people ‘like them’ should not be made without first consulting families.**
- **CSS groups could consider organising “holiday exchanges” with other groups to enable families to visit refugees in other locations, or using their CSS networks to connect families and support the development of friendship networks.**

## Housing

Housing is key for refugee families as it has a significant impact on their sense of stability and security. Housing location also determines access to education, healthcare and employment which are all the basic markers for integration. Most refugee respondents expressed delight at the housing they had been given and were surprised at how well equipped it was.

The majority of groups struggled to identify affordable and suitable housing in their local area. Some found accommodation in nearby neighbourhoods or used their networks to identify sympathetic private landlords prepared to offer appropriate and affordable accommodation for two years. Many feared that, after the two years of support with accommodation, the families would not be able to afford to remain in their home or even in the same area and would be forced to move, creating a new period of instability. Refugee respondents too spoke of their desire to remain settled after so many years of instability and overall wanted to remain in the housing that the group had acquired for them. Lack of access to affordable housing was a key factor that prevented groups from sponsoring a second family.

In some local authorities, where refugees are supported through other resettlement schemes, agreements have been made with Housing Associations to provide housing. Working closely with Housing Associations may help groups to develop knowledge about ways of accessing housing in neighbourhoods that are safe, more diverse with access to appropriate services. The majority of groups interviewed stated that they had accessed housing from the private sector, often using their social networks. Feedback from landlords had indicated that they found refugees excellent tenants. This information could be used to promote renting to refugees.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Groups should consider approaching housing associations directly to discuss housing issues and options.**
- **Reset and the Home Office might consider contacting the National Landlords Association to promote the scheme and the positive experiences that landlords renting to refugee tenants are having.**

## Community sponsorship and family reunification

Although refugee families are referred for resettlement by UNHCR in a specific family composition, often parent(s) and children as the same case, most refugees had lived with extended family before fleeing their homes. All refugees interviewed expressed a strong desire to be reunited with family members such as parents, adult children and siblings and worried about relatives and friends who remained in danger. Refugee families arrived in the UK unaware that it would be difficult for them to be reunited with extended family members. Discovering that there was no prospect of being reunited with family from whom they may have been separated for years sometimes resulted in



deep despair which undermined the ability to integrate more generally.

Some families had asked their CSS groups to help bring their families into the UK. Volunteers did not understand the UK's complex family reunion regulations and struggled to explain to families the constraints they were under or indeed know how to help. Seeing refugees distressed about family reunification was upsetting for volunteers.

Refugees should have been provided with guidance in their Welcome to the UK booklet about the options for family reunion but may not have absorbed this information. Alternatively they may have heard reports of reunification taking place with those resettled elsewhere in the world. However, in the UK the legal options for family reunion are complex and limited.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Refugees should be very clearly advised before they agree to resettlement in the UK about the likelihood and associated timeframes of family reunion.**
- **Groups should be informed before families arrive about the impact that separation from wider family has on refugees and that they are likely to be asked to help secure reunion (now covered in Reset training).**
- **Volunteers should familiarise themselves with Reset's guidance on family reunification<sup>5</sup> and be prepared to discuss with refugees its options and limitations.**
- **Refugee families may also ask about travelling to mainland Europe to visit family members and thus training for CSS groups should include signposting refugees to organisations that can help them to apply for Convention Travel Documents.**
- **The Home Office should give serious consideration to allowing the sponsorship of named refugees as a mechanism to enable family reunion. This would facilitate**

**integration for existing families and, because existing families will help support new arrivals, increase the likelihood of success for named families.**

---

### **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)

---

<sup>5</sup> See <https://training-resetuk.org/sites/default/files/toolkit-files/2019-10/2.7.1c-answering-questions-about-fa> and <https://training-resetuk.org/toolkit/working-with-refugees/answering-key-questions/immigration>