

Community Sponsorship and learning from refugees' experiences

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 briefing draws on the findings from the evaluation.

Trust and transparency

Refugees' feelings of gratitude sometimes made it difficult for them to raise their concerns, for fear of seeming ungrateful or becoming a burden. The opportunity to speak to our researcher in Arabic in an unmediated manner offered an opportunity to speak openly about their hopes and concerns.

“ I have asked for some things from them. At first, I felt bad asking because I didn't want to become a burden because they have done so much for us. I said I wouldn't ask again and felt a bit embarrassed. ”
Female, 12 months in UK, diverse area.

Whilst refugees were frequently overwhelmed with the scale of help and support received and the warmth of their welcome, some interviewees

spoke of how volunteers, with the best of intentions, took actions to help them without consulting them. For example, they introduced them to other Arabic families seeking to help them to build social networks without first asking if they would like to meet, not realising that this “match-making” could sometimes cause embarrassment and discomfort. They were also aware that volunteers tended to consult interpreters, who may have a completely different background to them, about refugees' “culture” rather than asking them directly. Refugees were surprised that volunteers would not ask questions about their former lives and their culture and traditions and were on the whole keen to engage in conversations around these matters. Volunteers needed to feel empowered to have open and honest conversations with refugees and encouraged to ask them before taking well-meaning actions based on assumptions.

RECOMMENDATION:

- **Reset offers guidance on ‘preparing for uncomfortable conversations’¹ and training for all new volunteers should include the development of skills to conduct frank conversations with refugee adults in a respectful way.**

Understanding the needs of different groups

Children

Prior to resettlement many children were out of the education system for prolonged periods. However, children’s education and future career paths were key priorities for refugees. Volunteers took on roles in helping refugee children to access schools, attended parents’ evening meetings, and provided one to one tuition to help support children’s learning. Refugee parents were grateful to the CSS groups for their efforts in finding schools appropriate for their children.

Many refugees felt concerned that cultural and religious differences might affect their relationship with their own children in the future, one fear being that their children would lose their identity and become unfamiliar with their traditions.

Schools were highly praised by all the refugee families and on the whole young children fared extremely well. However, some incidents of bullying were reported and there appeared to be a need for greater awareness in schools of refugees’ situations and how they may shape learning capacity as well as issues such as language barriers and trauma from recent experiences.

Teenagers

Teenage refugees were reported to have struggled more than young children to adapt to their new life in the UK. Their education

was often disrupted prior to arrival and some had been working in paid employment to try and help their families, essentially living adult lives. They needed support to catch up due to language barriers and the complexity of work at secondary school level. Volunteers found that teenagers appeared more affected by memories of conflict and violence in Syria and were in clear need of help to address their trauma. However, finding suitable mental health support proved challenging due to the lack of counselling in Arabic.

Men

Refugees told us that it was often traditional in their families for the men to be breadwinners and women to be carers and housekeepers, although this could vary depending on family circumstances. Accessing employment in the UK could be difficult for refugees as it is dependent on learning English. Men, especially when they had received little schooling in Arabic, were said to have difficulty learning in classroom settings and had difficulties with the ESOL curriculum. Slow progress towards financial self-sufficiency left some men feeling unable to provide for their families, impacting negatively on their self-esteem and in some cases leading to depression. The distress experienced by male refugees could generate anxiety for all members of the family and volunteers. These difficulties could be exacerbated by a lack of male volunteers with whom male refugees could connect.

Older people

Refugees told us that in their home countries, adults above the age of 65 consider themselves elderly and lead slower lifestyles. Those over the age of 45 struggled in ESOL classes and were frustrated at low levels of progress. One of the biggest surprises for refugees in the UK was how active older people were, for example, in some cases entire sponsor groups were over the age of 60. Volunteers often perceived older refugees as ‘inactive’ and pushed them to do more. At the same time, older refugees viewed their role as passing on important intergenerational skills and offering childcare and support. Further,

¹ See <https://training-resetuk.org/toolkit/working-with-refugees/dealing-with-challenges/preparing-uncomfortable-conversations>

many older refugees had experienced much loss and lived incredibly hard lives for many years and still longed to be reunited with family members in other countries. In view of this, volunteers might need to manage better their expectations about what older refugees can cope with in terms of language learning and integration. Refugees found the tailored private language tuition provided by volunteers in their homes to be very helpful.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **CSS groups should continue to offer one to one support and tailored help with language and education. Where possible, good practice should be shared with Reset.**
- **CSS groups should recognise the importance of including male volunteers of a variety of ages within their groups who can support refugee men.**
- **Training from Reset to CSS groups should cover the possible challenges associated with supporting a refugee family, including around experiences of conflict and trauma, and where to find resources to address these.**
- **Training should include support to understand the specific needs of different cohorts of refugees (i.e. those who have been outside of education) and how to manage expectations of what refugees might achieve within the 12 month period.**

Interpreting

Interpreters play a key role in the CSS, not only interpreting but also through acting as 'cultural mediators' especially where they have direct experience of both Middle Eastern and British cultures.

“It wasn't just the language, it was his understanding of the culture, of the religion and of other refugee families.”

He knows all the things that they're thinking about. ”

Urban group

However, there were several challenges associated with interpreting:

- In the weeks after a refugee family's arrival, an interpreter was required daily, but few groups had budgeted for sufficient interpretation in this period.
- Interpreters needed to understand the aims of the CSS to be able to facilitate good communication and help to build trust between volunteers and refugees.
- Being able to speak Arabic did not mean that interpreters would automatically form a good relationship with refugee families or provide appropriate guidance. They also needed to be approachable, empathetic and knowledgeable.
- Local interpreters may not have been available in rural areas. Groups would have to employ interpreters from outside the community who would charge for travel time. They needed to budget for this.
- The gender of interpreters could make a big difference in communication outcomes. Many women needed a female interpreter to discuss personal matters or medical needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Groups should budget to ensure that ample interpretation is provided in the first few months, ideally from both male and female interpreters.**
- **Volunteers should familiarise themselves with Reset's guidance on finding and working with interpreters, including those who can provide interpreting face to face or by phone.²**
- **Where possible, groups should try to incorporate an interpreter into their core group of volunteers as this can help facilitate stronger relationships with refugee families, although they should**

² See <https://training-resetuk.org/toolkit/working-with-refugees/empowering-refugees/interpreting-options>

be mindful of the pressures that could be placed on that volunteer.³

- **Volunteers should work with interpreters prior to the family's arrival to ensure they understand the purpose and framework of the CSS.**
- **Volunteers should identify a suite of other techniques for day to day communication. Reset offer a range of resources for day to day communication, including a list of basic phrases in English and Arabic⁴ which can be used alongside online platforms.**

Living on benefits

Until refugees secured employment they were reliant on benefits which posed a number of challenges. Many groups had undergone training or recruited volunteers with the requisite experience and expertise around Universal Credit. However, they still struggled to understand fully refugees' welfare entitlements and encounter problems that they found hard to resolve.

Delays in benefits payments, lasting months, compounded by a lack of familiarity with the benefit system by refugee families and lack of expertise on the part of volunteers created confusion and financial difficulty. Some families did not understand why their money was not forthcoming which may have undermined their relationship with the CSS group.

Most volunteers were relatively wealthy and not well placed to offer advice about how to get by on a low income. In one example, a group recommended that refugees shop in the "best" local supermarket which was also the most expensive. It took some months before they found out about other much cheaper alternatives.

Newly arrived refugee families had little or no idea of the prices of products and services in the UK. Some spent their first instalment of money on products that volunteers perceived as 'unnecessary', not realising how much money they had spent or how the expenditure would impact on their ability to budget for the remainder of the month.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Volunteers should seek additional training on the benefits system available in their local area and make use of Reset's guidance on accessing benefits.⁵ In addition, they should seek further insight into the realities of surviving on benefits.**
- **Groups should be prepared to use the DWP Refugee Group Leads Network if the family they support have difficulties accessing benefits.⁶**

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

³ See https://training-resetuk.org/sites/default/files/toolkit-files/2019-03/2.6.7_volunteer_interpreters.pdf

⁴ See <https://training-resetuk.org/toolkit/working-with-refugees/planning-arrival/common-arabic-words-and-phrases>

⁵ See <https://training-resetuk.org/toolkit/working-with-refugees/learning-about-benefits>

⁶ See <https://training-resetuk.org/toolkit/working-with-refugees/learning-about-benefits/working-with-jobcentres>