

The wider impact of Community Sponsorship on communities

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 of interviews with wider community members looking at the impact of the CSS on knowledge of, and attitudes to, refugees in five small towns characterised by low levels of ethnic diversity.

The CSS was introduced with the expectation that a community-led approach would result in positive outcomes for both refugees and communities. Since 2016, nearly 400 refugees have been resettled into rural, urban, and suburban areas. Findings from interviews with volunteers undertaken as part of the formative evaluation indicated that the introduction of CSS in less diverse areas offered the potential to transform community members' understanding of refugee issues; to reduce fears about others; to change working practices to make them more inclusive for wider diverse populations; and to bring new perspectives into relatively homogeneous communities.

Awareness-raising and relationship-building

In some communities there was resistance to plans to resettle refugees locally, in part fuelled

by anti-migration messaging in the mainstream media. This resistance was reflected in negative comments in local newspapers, blogs and via social media and could be more profound in more 'isolated', less diverse communities. While on the whole local people were accepting of refugees, some children were bullied at school.

The evaluation found that hostility tended to die away after the arrival of the refugee family, possibly following awareness-raising efforts on the part of volunteers and also the positive impact of interacting directly with refugee families.

CSS volunteers and especially group leaders worked hard on different initiatives to educate, inform, and connect their communities with refugee families. These would include taking steps to explain the CSS to local residents and neighbours; to dispel myths about refugees' circumstances and needs; and to allay any fears amongst local organisations and institutions about the impact of the arrival of refugees on

the area. Activities included talking about the opportunities that refugees would bring to the locality, including the prospect of learning from different cultures and the promotion of positive values such as inclusion and diversity.

CSS groups ran events to introduce refugee families to the local community, encouraged refugees to attend wider community events and arranged awareness-raising activities. These opportunities for direct interaction and to build relationships helped members of the community familiarise with the new family, overcome any initial fears and become more accepting. Sometimes refugees volunteered at local events and often contributed donations such as food. Such actions led to encounters with local people.

“ I have heard that different charities and churches have been trying to organise social events for the families. That is very good because they feel that people care about them.... And if you're a refugee you just come in and make the effort to mingle...support groups for only women are very good because they are used to socialising and they feel free to express their feelings with their peers... They love to share their cooking and they love to share a meal and chat... ”

Voluntary sector

Individuals benefited from witnessing the generosity, welcome and hospitality of their new neighbours, and from interacting with people from different cultures. In turn, they could then share stories of their experiences interacting with refugees with individuals outside of refugees' contact zone which could have a 'transformative effect' on others. The arrival of refugees to largely homogenous communities was said to have helped to make these communities more outward looking and less fearful of change or difference.

Good practice

Nurseries and schools proved to be good spaces for casual socialisation and interaction for the whole family. In one school, located in a small community, the connection of British and refugee parents was encouraged through the implementation of creative 'mentorship pairing' programmes.

Supporting service providers and institutions

Local institutions, including schools, hospitals, Jobcentre Plus and community groups, reported receiving high levels of support from CSS groups in advance of refugee arrival. This support enabled them to understand and address the needs of the refugee families and was particularly impactful for those who had not previously engaged with refugees or migrants and may have had preconceived ideas about their culture and behaviours. Some individuals employed in institutions said that working with refugees increased levels of job satisfaction while others said they shared the good practice developed as a result of their interactions with refugees with CSS groups. These actions were also said to help improve services for non-refugee users who did not speak English well.

Schools were helped to adapt their approaches to teaching and produce new materials. They connected with other schools to access materials for children who had been out of education for some time and shared materials they produced with other schools.

Barriers to integration

The advent of the CSS brought some challenges for community members but beyond reporting that they needed to adapt their services most respondents talked about the challenges that

refugees themselves faced in trying to integrate. They highlighted problems with communication, the lack of support available locally for wellbeing, poor transport opportunities and the difficulties faced by refugees to find jobs locally. Several participants were aware that the combination of those aspects, and the poor connection with the wider community, resulted in social isolation that would be difficult to overcome in the short term. This was compounded by refugees' separation from their close families and the awareness that refugees were unable to reunite with their loved ones.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **CSS groups should be provided with basic materials to explain both the scheme and refugees to the wider community.**
 - **CSS groups should work with communities and institutions in advance of refugee family arrival to explain the scheme and why refugees need resettlement.**
 - **CSS groups should run regular community events bringing refugees and the community together around, for example, cultural exchanges or food sharing.**
 - **In the longer-term CSS volunteers should support refugees to attend meetings and volunteer with the wider community.**
 - **CSS groups should be encouraged to obtain feedback from the wider community, local organisations and institutions about what they have gained from their interactions with refugees and share with Reset to develop a positive news resource.**
 - **CSS volunteers should be supported to have difficult conversations with individuals who are resistant to refugee resettlement.**
 - **CSS groups should be supported to recognise racism and to be able to work with institutions to undertake appropriate action.**
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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