

Community Sponsorship in the UK: Refugees to citizens



JUNE 2020 REPORT

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to financial support from the Quality-Related Strategic Priorities Funding, UKRI 2019-2020 and Economic and Social Council IAA Fund. We are grateful for the time and interest of all refugees who were interviewed for this study and for the support received from Reset and the Home Office in terms of advice, guidance and enabling us to access CSS groups.

Executive Summary

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Home Office introduced the UK's Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS) in 2016. The Institute for Research into Superdiversity (IRiS) commenced a formative evaluation of the scheme in 2017 and presented interim findings in July 2019. This report builds on the findings of the first phase of the evaluation offering new insight on the aspirations and experiences of refugees supported by the scheme.

Chapter 2: Research methods

Research methods consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted with adult refugees and CSS volunteers. Interviews were undertaken with 61 adult refugees who had lived in the UK for at least three months. Following an introduction from Reset, the research team contacted group leaders from 22 CSS groups who explained the research to the refugee adults they supported. Potential respondents were asked if they wished to participate in the study with those who agreed interviewed in Arabic between January 2017 and March 2020. Full ethical approval was received from the University of Birmingham Ethical Review Committee.

Chapter 3: Experiences before arrival to the UK

Before the conflict in Syria respondents had led happy and healthy lives surrounded by close friends and family. Many lost family and belongings in the conflict and waited years to be resettled, living in poor conditions and experiencing high levels of poverty and harassment. Although delighted to be resettled in the UK no respondents received any information about CSS and how it operated, before their arrival, and many respondents were surprised to find themselves in areas without access to services and people like them.

Chapter 4: Settling down in the UK

Respondents spoke of their surprise and joy at the warmth of welcome at the airport and in the community. Most found their housing to be beyond their expectations, well equipped and comfortable. Some were located in housing that did not meet all of their needs, in particular in rural areas, away from transport and facilities. Respondents found the financial and benefits assistance received from their groups invaluable. However male respondents expected to be able to work soon after arrival and felt "useless" when they were not able to achieve this and disappointed by their slow progress with English language learning. Refugees were pleased with the education support that CSS groups gave their children. Older respondents and those who had received little education struggled to make progress in ESOL classes. Often, this group and some women refugees also lacked digital competency. Respondents found leisure activities helped them to understand more about their area and to meet people, but they worried that they did not know enough about local laws and regulations. Finding out that family reunion was not possible, and travel would be difficult was very disappointing for respondents.

Chapter 5: Social and cultural factors

Social connections were really important to respondents who saw building close and varied social networks as a way of recovering some of what they had lost. Connections helped respondents overcome loneliness and isolation. Often initially superficial connections deepened over time as women in particular built close relations with volunteers. Some respondents missed connecting with “people like me” and although groups tried to introduce them to other Arabic speaking families, they did not always ask their permission leading to some awkward encounters. Respondents wished that they could find ways to deepen superficial relations with neighbours and some volunteers. Over time respondents learned about British culture and were amazed at how open-minded British people were and the lack of discrimination. There were some disconnects between different priorities and paces of life in the UK and Syria and differences in gender relations.

Chapter 6: Hopes and fears

The main priority for male respondents was to access work and be financially independent. Respondents also wished to settle and own their own home. Most respondents wished to stay in the UK and all sought to apply for citizenship once eligible. Other priorities included helping others to give something back and ensuring their children succeed whilst retaining connections to their parents’ culture. A key concern was family reunion with few able to consider the possibility that they would feel integrated while separated from family.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and recommendations

On the whole, respondents reported positive experiences, but with some differences in evidence between men and women and those living in diverse and less diverse areas. Respondents recognised the amount of work that volunteers put into supporting them and were hugely appreciative of their efforts. These feelings of gratitude could make them reluctant to raise any concerns. This report has highlighted some of the strengths and weaknesses of the scheme from the perspective of refugees. There is much to celebrate but also clear potential for improvement, particularly in terms of clarifying expectations, improving language training, facilitating economic activity, building social connections and ensuring access to family reunion. We offer a series of recommendations about how to improve the scheme in the future.

Chapter 1:

Introduction

In 2016 the UK Government pledged to resettle 20,000 refugees from the Syrian conflict by 2020. One of the key innovations associated with this pledge was the development of the Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS). The UK's Community Sponsorship Scheme was introduced and enabled, for the first time in the UK, local community groups to become directly responsible for supporting refugee resettlement¹. The initiative was inspired by the Canadian private sponsorship scheme and was the second of its kind in the world. Since its establishment other Community Sponsorship type schemes are beginning to be established across Europe including in Ireland, Portugal and Germany.

Since the introduction of CSS nearly 400 refugees have been relocated across the UK, supported by around 70 CSS groups. In 2019 the UK Government committed to supporting the CSS for a further five years aiming to increase the numbers of refugees arriving under the scheme. Focus has been extended from refugees affected by the conflict in Syria to all vulnerable refugees². Furthermore, with the introduction of the UK's new Global Resettlement Scheme in 2020, refugees resettled under CSS will be additional to national targets. Despite the suspension of resettlement in the UK during the COVID-19 crisis, further groups are in development ready to receive refugee families once resettlement resumes.

In 2017 the Institute for Research into Superdiversity (IRiS) at the University of Birmingham commenced a formative evaluation of the Community Sponsorship Scheme with a view to ensuring that efforts aimed at supporting refugee families were as effective as possible. In 2018, the charity Reset was established to promote and support community sponsorship. IRiS and Reset connected and began to work together to increase the size and scope of the evaluation. The interim findings of the evaluation were presented in July 2019³ and included data collected from interviews with refugees and volunteers.

Data collected in the first stage of the evaluation reflected the fledgling nature of the scheme and identified some of the challenges that groups and refugees faced. Overall findings illustrated that despite some teething problems the scheme was working well, and that groups, volunteers and refugees were benefitting from the scheme. The findings from this report also fed directly into the

¹ Home Office, [Community Sponsorship, Guidance for prospective sponsors](#).

² Home Office. [New global resettlement scheme for the most vulnerable refugees announced](#)

³ Phillimore and Reyes (2019) [Community Sponsorship from application to integration. Formative Evaluation](#).

ongoing development of the CSS and Reset's services and were communicated directly to groups and other stakeholders via a report and policy and practice briefs.

This report expands on the first report to outline in detail the experiences of refugee families being resettled under the CSS. It contains data not included in the first report and data collected in 40 new interviews undertaken since March 2019. The findings presented provide insights into refugee resettlement experiences and the support they received. It examines the relationships and networks built with communities and outlines refugees' hopes and aspirations. We hope this report will provide useful insight into refugee experiences of community sponsorship that will aid CSS groups and those working with them to understand refugee perspectives and use these to shape services, policy, and practice. The report should also be of use to policymakers and practitioners working to develop sponsorship programmes elsewhere. Additional reports are available that draw together the perspectives of volunteers and refugees on the entire CSS process (www.birmingham.ac.uk/communitysponsorshipevaluation) and examine the impact of CSS on the wider community in less diverse areas (www.birmingham.ac.uk/widerimpactscommunitysponsorship).

This report is divided into seven chapters. Chapter Two sets out the research methods used to collect data. Chapter Three looks at experiences before arrival in the UK and Chapter Four examines experiences of settling down after arrival. In Chapter Five we consider the social and cultural factors shaping resettlement and in Chapter Six we explore refugees' hopes and fears about the future. Finally, in Chapter Seven we offer brief conclusions and some recommendations around how to improve refugee experiences of the Community Sponsorship Scheme.

Chapter 2:

Research methods

The aim of this study was to undertake a formative evaluation of the CSS with a view to shaping the roll out of the scheme in the UK and beyond. It was undertaken by the Institute for Research into Superdiversity (IRiS). Interviews were carried out with refugees sponsored under CSS, the volunteers supporting them and the wider communities in which they lived. Questions focused on arrival experiences, support offered and received, challenges experienced, integration processes and good practice.

The formative evaluation was undertaken in two phases. The first phase ran from January 2017 to March 2019 wherein interviews were conducted with 21 adult refugees. A further 40 interviews were undertaken between April 2019 and March 2020 with a total of 61 interviews completed (see Table 1). Some 55% of respondents were women, reflecting the gender balance of refugees within the CSS generally. In two instances we re-interviewed refugee adults who were first interviewed six weeks after arrival in the UK, and then after 12 months to explore progress since the first interview.

TABLE 1: TOTAL NUMBER OF REFUGEE INTERVIEWS

Phases	CS groups	Female	Male	Total interviews
Phase 1	14	13	8	21
Phase 2	8	20	20	40
Total	22	33	28	61

IRiS identified the groups they wished to interview from a list held by Reset. CSS group leaders were initially invited to participate by Reset with all but four groups agreeing to take part in the study. After agreement, the group leaders then contacted the refugee adults in the family they supported asking them if they would be prepared to speak in Arabic to a researcher wishing to interview them about their experiences of CSS. All but one family agreed to participate whereupon each respondent was approached by telephone, the study explained, and individuals asked again if they wished to participate. After agreement they were sent an Arabic language participant information form via WhatsApp and given a further opportunity to ask questions about the process. Once respondents were confident about participating, they and the researcher signed a consent form formally agreeing to participate. Respondents had been resettled across all countries in the UK and to different types of area. Of those interviewed 15 families lived in diverse urban areas and ten in less diverse small towns located in rural areas. Interviewees were asked where they wished to meet for an interview with all preferring to talk in their own homes.

Respondents were informed of their right to withdraw from the research and that their participation was voluntary. They were assured that their personal details were secured and understood that their identities would be anonymised when data or quotes were used in reports. Quotes presented in this report have been selected because of their ability to illustrate key experiences, and pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity. Full ethical approval was received from the University of Birmingham's Ethical Review Committee.

Chapter 3:

Experiences before arrival to the UK

Life before conflict

The war in the Middle East was a huge shock for respondents. Many reported fleeing to neighbouring countries to escape violence. Most respondents had healthy, happy and wealthy lives before the conflict. They had to leave most of their belongings behind and move to countries that lacked sufficient resources to support some of their own citizens. Refugees found themselves struggling to access food, shelter, and an education for their children. On arrival in countries of refuge, refugees registered with the UNHCR and then waited between two and seven years before their case was selected for resettlement. Those accepted for resettlement joined a waiting list often waiting a further six to twelve months. Refugees were often unclear about where they would be resettled. Some respondents were told they were going to be resettled in the USA but after the election of Donald in November 2016, these plans were cancelled.

Refugee families were selected for CSS by the UNHCR on behalf of the UK Government. They were interviewed and asked whether they wished to resettle in the UK. After accepting this offer refugees engaged in a series of medical and other checks. Once their resettlement was confirmed they participated in a short introductory course about life in the UK. A month before departure they were informed about the location to which they would be settled but reported that they knew little about this location.

Arrival in the UK was a stressful and emotional experience. Many respondents had never flown before and they felt deeply uncertain about their future. Refugees were welcomed at the airport by their CSS group and interpreters. Volunteers held up signs with the names of the refugee families written in Arabic and English. After passing through immigration they were driven to the accommodation allocated to them for the next two years. Respondents were generally surprised to find the housing well equipped and by the warm welcome they received from volunteers. In the weeks following their arrival, respondents were supported to access medical and social services. Their children were registered at local schools and they were supported to access English language tuition.

Before the conflict refugees were living what they described as a normal life.

Living a normal life, we had a job, a house and a wonderful family, in one night all is gone
(Male, 14 months in UK, Diverse area).

Many of the male refugees, commonly the breadwinners for their families, had permanent jobs, such as teachers, public government administrators and IT technicians, or were running their own businesses, for example, chefs, mechanics and hairdressers. Most respondents owned their own housing or farms. The majority came from urban areas although some lived in rural areas.

I never thought I will leave Syria. I was successful and had a good job. I only had to leave because of the lack of security for me and my family in Syria (Male, 16 months in UK, Diverse area).

They lived in close proximity to family and friends who they saw on an everyday basis. These networks offered emotional, social, and sometimes economic support, with respondents running businesses and small enterprises together. Women were mostly full-time mothers although after fleeing they used skills such as hairdressing, cleaning and tailoring to help support their families. Before the conflict women enjoyed frequent gatherings in each other's homes with sisters, mothers and grandmothers. They cooked together, sang, danced, and celebrated life events. Men met their friends and brothers in cafes after work. They met for prayers in mosques and churches. Neighbours were considered part of the extended family with frequent unannounced visits for coffee and conversation. Neighbours were the closest and first point of contact in an emergency.

Most of the refugee adults interviewed had received primary education with two exceptions who had received no schooling and were not literate. Some five respondents were university graduates. Many women married before flight in their late teens or early twenties with some younger, as was the social norm. However, five women married in camps or countries of refuge. Eight respondents had long term or chronic health problems.

Experiences of conflict and escape

Almost all respondents fled during the conflict in 2011 with some men fleeing first and joined later by their families. The daily bombardment of neighbourhoods, riots in the streets and warfare made it impossible for some families to stay. Some made the decision to leave after they lost all their belongings and family members in air strikes. One respondent remembers the airstrikes:

I used to live in a cul-de-sac and had all my friends and family there. Everyone died in an air strike on my street in my area, we were the only family who survived the strike bombing. I miss my friends (Male, 14 months in UK, less diverse area).

Such experiences had an impact on their and their children's mental health. Many lost loved ones, friends, family, and neighbours in one night. Some respondents were injured. One respondent explains the scale of the loss:

Yes, we managed to get out but my family; my siblings, my mother and my friends did not. These are issues you feel that a Syrian always has on the back of his mind (Male, 18 months in UK, diverse area).

Some recalled difficult journeys walking on foot for days to reach refugee camps. Most respondents walked to the nearest border which could be 24 hours from their home. They usually fled with little money and just the belongings they could carry. Thus, they needed to find work as soon as possible after arrival. However, jobs were scarce, and interviewees reported being mistreated by employers

who exploited them because they were aware that they were not permitted to work. Without decent employment or access to welfare respondents struggled to survive.

When my husband used to work they would only pay him half of the day's pay. They told him you are Syrian you should be grateful and you can sue us if you don't like it. His salary at the end of the month was barely enough, just to cover the rent, food and basics. The apartments in Jordan were overpriced. They would rent out places that Jordanians wouldn't want to live in (Female, 18 months in UK, less diverse area).

Respondents often had no legal rights and were unable to file complaints with the police despite experiencing racism including physical and psychological violence. Most of the refugees interviewed did not live in camps but were renting apartments or sometimes rooms for the whole family to live in. Rents were high and housing conditions were mostly poor and unhygienic.

Refugee children had limited access to places in the already overcrowded public schools, with many falling out of education. When their parents could afford to pay for nurseries or schools, many were harassed and bullied by other students. Children were bullied when playing outside in the streets.

My kids went to a school and they got hurt a lot. One boy put a rock in a snowball and hit my boy with it and said that they were just playing with snow, even though it was a rock and not snow more than once (Female, 15 months in UK, diverse area).

However, most respondents said they could socially integrate in these countries as their cultures were similar and they were surrounded by many other refugees and thus were able to form extensive social networks.

Upon being told they were accepted for resettlement respondents described how happy they felt. They waited further months whilst undergoing a series of medical exams and interviews by agencies working on the part of resettlement countries.

They attended the 'Life in the UK' course which gave basic information about UK culture and everyday life but were given no information about the CSS and what it entails. Some respondents were informed about their resettlement location and were shown a photograph of the house they would be living in but none had contact with CSS volunteers.

Expectations

Many respondents had expectations about life in the UK which they gained from social media and extended social networks already resident in Europe. A number of interviewees lacked knowledge about the geography of the region and were unable to distinguish between the UK and mainland Europe assuming that countries were in fact cities near to each other. Some had family and friends living in Europe and even the UK and reported receiving much inaccurate information.

We heard from those who got here before us, we were in contact with them. We don't know them but only through Facebook, there are many groups for Syrians in the UK. Since, they told us that we are travelling to the UK, I joined the groups and listened to people's opinions (Male, 12 months in UK, diverse area).

Most refugees had heard good things about the education and healthcare systems and saw coming to the UK as a way of ensuring a good future for their children or resolving chronic health conditions. They also believed they would be able to find work easily.

The 'Life in the UK' course did not offer a full picture of the realities of resettlement and day to day issues. Respondents learned about differences in traditions, freedom of clothing and style, differences in culture and religious practices and some basic laws and regulations. Some refugees who settled in less diverse areas were surprised that they were the only people from Arab backgrounds living in the area, and felt quite different from local people, because they wore modest Islamic clothing. There appeared to be a lack of cultural knowledge on the part of both the refugees and volunteers. Respondents were positively surprised after years of harassment in exile by the friendliness and helpfulness of strangers in the UK and reported feeling overwhelmed by some people's kindness. The positive reception they received improved their initial sense of belonging.

Some respondents were surprised that the area to which they were resettled was remote and had no access to services and 'people like me'. As we explain later, they felt isolated away from other Arabic speakers and had not been told that they would be living in such a remote and ethnically homogeneous place.

I really expected to meet at least one Syrian family, I have not seen one single Middle Eastern or Arab that I can connect with. So I expected to meet a Syrian woman I can be friends with and talk about our memories, I just thought I could make a friends really (Female, 14 months in UK, less diverse area).

Chapter 4:

Settling down in the UK

This chapter explores the support that refugees received upon arrival, their view on progress and some of the challenges they encountered focusing upon functional and facilitative aspects of integration such as work and health, language learning, digital skills and rights and responsibilities. Respondents expressed the high levels of gratitude they felt about everything they had received since arrival. They recognised the huge amount of work that volunteers put into supporting them and indeed into enabling them to come to the UK at all.

I am overwhelmed with the help I got here, and I am sure that God will bless them for all the help they have given me. I hope that I could live long enough to return their favours and help others like I was helped (Female, 14 months in UK, diverse area).

These feelings of gratitude led them to feel reluctant to raise any concerns they had about experiences or relationships in the UK. They were keen to avoid asking for assistance around some matters because they did not wish to become a burden to their sponsors.

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).

Respondents spoke of wanting to share concerns with our Arabic speaking researcher that they had not previously voiced in the UK, for fear of seeming ungrateful. We explore some of these concerns as well as positive experiences below.

Arrival and welcome

Most respondents experienced a warm and emotional reception from volunteers both at the airport and once in their community which made them feel positive about the decision to come to the UK. The first few weeks after arrival were said to be critical in building their relationships with volunteers. While some had basic English skills, the majority only spoke Arabic and thus were heavily dependent on an interpreter in the first few months. When the interpreter was not available, they relied on dictionaries and online platforms to communicate. Interpreters played a crucial role as they mediated most communications between the group and refugees. Those interpreters who were both familiar with British culture and institutions and the culture of refugees appeared to make resettlement processes run more smoothly for refugees and were less likely to cause offence. There were instances where interpreters passed incorrect information to refugees or behaved in ways that undermined trust or caused embarrassment. The gender of the interpreter was important and could make a huge difference around the nature of conversations refugees were prepared to have. Respondents

informed us that women should not be discussed with men, even within the sponsor group. Anything concerning women's personal lives and medical needs requires a female interpreter.

It should not be assumed that all interpreters automatically know how to interact with refugees simply because they speak Arabic. However, most relationships with interpreters were good and the support offered by groups helped refugees to settle in. We cover some of these types of support received below.

Housing

CSS groups identified suitable housing for refugees and secured this for two years. Housing was key given the poor conditions in which most had resided for years and it enabled respondents to feel safe and comfortable in the difficult first weeks after arrival. One respondent explains how he felt:

When I saw the house, I felt settled. The interpreter told me what the head of our group had said, "don't be afraid of anything. You are safe here. There is nothing to frighten you here at all (Male, 4 months in the UK, diverse area).

For some the housing exceeded their expectations and signalled an end to the trauma they had experienced. Respondents appreciated the efforts made to furnish and equip the home. Many groups had also done grocery shopping and stocked up homes with Middle Eastern food as well as provided gifts for the children. This helped respondents to feel welcome and safe.

I didn't expect to come to such an area and such a house. I expected a small house to meet our basic needs, with my four children sharing rooms. When I first came into the house, I was very surprised to be honest. It was large, with a garden, and because of the support from the group, it was stocked with a lot of things. There are some things they provided I still use to this day, 6 months later. From the household items, to clothes even, they had provided. They paid attention to the details, even things like toothpaste, toothbrushes, it was all there. There wasn't anything that was missing (Male, 9 months in UK, diverse area).

Respondents gradually learned that they would be able to remain in their home for two years which was largely reassuring although some worried what they would do after this period. While the vast majority were comfortable with their accommodation a number expressed concerns about its location which brought problems that made their daily lives more difficult. Lack of proximity to halal shops and supermarkets selling necessary goods was problematic, although where possible volunteers tried to help them access important foodstuffs. Furthermore, some refugees had injuries or illnesses that made walking long distances up and down hill to the shops difficult, yet they did not want to ask for help.

In more remote areas, public transport was expensive and infrequent. Refugees struggled with the costs but also, there was a stigma attached to using buses. We were told that they came from a background that was car-oriented with families using cars on an everyday basis. Possessing a car is an indicator of esteem whereas using a bus is an indicator of poverty. Refugee men felt under pressure in rural areas to take their driving test and save money for a car. This was particularly difficult as we discuss below because they lacked the language skills needed to pass the test and struggled to access work. Indeed, not having a car and living in a rural area could act as a barrier to accessing jobs as there were so few locally.

Health

CSS volunteers helped respondents to register with a GP and to arrange appointments, travel to appointments and where needed accompanied respondents. This was particularly important for those with critical or chronic health conditions who were sometimes also helped with childcare and basic provision of food and housework while they underwent treatments. Haleem explains the help he received when he told volunteers that he had been diagnosed with cancer in Syria:

They immediately took me to the GP, James took me, and explained everything to the doctor, and I also had an interpreter present. I was told I would receive a letter from the hospital, where I went. They told me I would have some imaging and tests and that they would communicate with me. They did that and told me my condition was stable but every 3 years I would require the same tests, and they would continue monitoring me (Male, 9 months in UK, diverse area).

Respondents often received support from volunteers with a healthcare background whose knowledge of the system enabled ease of navigation. Volunteers helped refugee mothers' with ante-natal appointments and post-natal care after delivery. Some provided support with childcare throughout. Such help was hugely appreciated and reassured respondents who were going through difficult experiences away from the friends and family who would usually support them.

The nurse from the group still accompanies me to all my appointments in hospital just as she did in the beginning. They also helped when I was in labour. She took the kids to her house for two days and cared for them with her children until I got out of hospital with my new baby (Female, 18 months in UK, less diverse area).

Employment and financial support

Financial support received was described as overwhelming and much needed. Many of the groups offered support when benefits were delayed. Some respondents received a stipend provided by the group to help them establish in their early months which they used to buy necessities such as food, clothing and school uniforms, and household and kitchen gadgets. CSS groups often had a dedicated volunteer who helped the family with the complex benefits system, support they found invaluable. Some were given transport tickets in their first few months to help them to get around. This help was a lifeline to those struggling to survive on Universal Credit.

It is very expensive to go to Croydon. They (the CS group) used to give me £100 every month for transport to attend the college (Male, 4 months in UK, diverse area).

Other groups paid for the adults to have driving lessons and helped them to practice their driving in volunteers' cars. This support was essential for those living in areas where access to public transport was poor. When respondents struggled with the UK's driving theory test, groups offered informal or paid support.

The group paid for a teacher who helps me with the theory test and also practice driving but it is very difficult. I failed many times (Male, 18 months in UK, less diverse area).

All respondents lacked knowledge about the welfare system, but some groups also struggled. Middle class volunteers had no experience of living on extremely limited incomes and were unable to help

respondents learn how to manage their money. Some really struggled to make ends meet and when they asked volunteers for help, for example where to shop, they were given poor advice and sent to the more expensive supermarkets finding out later from others about much cheaper places.

Male refugees desperately wanted to work as soon as they arrived because they wanted to be financially self-sufficient and support their families. They viewed taking care of their family as their primary role in life so not being able to work, or even knowing when that would be possible, undermined self-confidence and led to some men saying they felt useless.

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

Accessing work was perhaps the biggest challenge especially as they were expected to learn English before they could get a job. Some felt they were trapped in poverty and struggled to see a way out. Volunteers were active in some areas using their social networks and other resources to try to find work for refugees. They sought to identify voluntary work that would enable respondents gain work experience and assisted refugees to establish their own businesses.

The group advertised for my work and got me a few jobs to do like gardening jobs. they also got me a van for my tools to get more jobs done. They helped with getting jobs by printing business cards for me. They found that I am clever and finish jobs efficiently (Male, 18 months in UK, less diverse area).

Education

Most respondents argued that their main reason for seeking resettlement was to do the best they could for their children's future with access to education a priority. All respondents found the help they received in finding appropriate schools invaluable.

Before we arrived, the children had already been enrolled into schools ... they had prepared everything for them. The school had a week left of term before it closes so we went to see the school basically they showed us around and told us that the children were enrolled at this school ... this thing makes me happy as a father who is responsible for the family (Male, 14 months in UK, diverse area).

Volunteers offered individual tutoring to refugee children helping to support them to fit in to schools and catch up with their education. Some groups paid for refugee children to attend additional classes or receive music lessons, which was much appreciated. One respondent explained how her son was helped with his learning difficulties:

Particularly my son who had learning difficulties. They assigned a private tutor and they check his homework with him at home. They also got him a tablet and a recorder to improve his speech and attainment. The group members all tutored my children (Female, 18 months in UK, less diverse area).

Another respondent explained how his children excelled at school because of the group's support:

They help my kids weekly with an English lesson. Then they found a separate teacher for the kids. This was indispensable help and support for us. Additionally, every week a teacher comes

to teach my kids Maths. My kids are improving greatly. Their English is fluent. My teenage daughter is now first on her class in English (Male, 16 months in UK, less diverse area).

Women took great pride in the achievements and progress of their children with some quickly learning English themselves. Teenagers found settling into school much harder than younger children. Many had been out of education for some years and struggled to concentrate. They also found connecting socially difficult as many of the social groups at school were long established.

Language learning

Refugee respondents know that language is the key to successful communication and integration and thus learning English was their top priority. All were enrolled by their groups into local ESOL classes. In addition, most refugees were provided with volunteer tutors who taught the family basic English either as a family or on a one on one basis. Tutoring was sometimes offered separately for parents and children as they progressed at different rates.

They gave us private English lessons with a teacher from the group. They also provided a separate teacher for my mother who was a bit behind (Male, 16 months in UK, less diverse area).

Many women excelled in the ESOL courses which they attributed to their role tutoring their children and learning via their children's schoolwork, as well as in their own language lessons. Refugee women with younger children were encouraged to join local mother and baby groups to help them access an opportunity for informal language learning and practice.

Older respondents and those who were not educated really struggled to learn English with ESOL classes described as inaccessible to the point that they undermined refugees' self-esteem. Lack of progress left respondents feeling hopeless, especially as men realised that without being able to speak English, they were unlikely to find work.

I found it difficult. They told me they wanted to register me in a college, I was a bit worried as I hadn't really been through the education system, and how would I be after all these years without education (Male, 9 months in UK, diverse area).

Digital skills

Digital skills are defined as a range of abilities to use digital devices, communication applications, and networks to access and manage information. Refugee families need to have digital skills to access the many services that are online in the UK, but also importantly to remain in contact with family overseas. Many refugee adults have non-existent or low-level digital skills, requiring support to make basic use of digital devices. Women and older respondents had the weakest digital skills and young people the strongest. On the whole CSS volunteers were aware of the need for refugees to be online so provided Wi-Fi and access to a PC or laptop, but they were not always cognisant of the need to provide training to adults, leaving some the wrong side of the digital divide.

Leisure

Leisure activities are vital for refugee families, helping them to get to know the local area and meet people in an informal way. Many refugees expressed their joy going out to parks, having picnics and spending days out sightseeing. Such trips were often arranged by volunteers and provided them with

opportunities to deepen social connections with volunteers or other friends. Trips were said to have a positive impact on respondents' wellbeing. One respondent describes his latest leisure trips:

We went to that castle, we went to X Park. It is a very nice park, it contains sea creatures. XXX and I went to London and rode bicycles (Male, 9 months in UK, diverse area).

Rights and responsibilities

Respondents expressed concern that their lack of knowledge of their rights and responsibilities in the UK influenced their overall integration. Many feared that they might be sent back to camps if they did not adhere to laws or rules yet were concerned that they did not know all the rules. They were particularly concerned about the rules around childrearing and had heard via social media stories about children taken away from their parents worrying that this may happen to them if they shouted at their children. Others were unclear about the legality of physical chastisement which was a common means of discipline back home. Refugees came to the UK with the belief that they were entitled to apply for family reunion and would be able to travel to visit family. Finding out that this was not possible in the near future was a huge shock and source of disappointment. They relied heavily on volunteers for advice about these matters, but it was evident that volunteers were also unclear about rights of reunion and travel.

Chapter 5:

Social and cultural factors

This chapter explores refugee respondents' social connections, their social needs and some of the challenges they encountered, before moving on to consider some of the challenges faced around differences in culture between refugees' country of origin and the UK.

Social connections

Social networks are at the heart of the CSS and in general are central to integration processes, as they facilitate access to different kinds of resources such as employment, education, and emotional support. There are three kinds of social connections:

1. Bonding – connections with 'people like me'
2. Bridging – connections with 'people who are not like me'
3. Linking – connections with organisations and institutions

These connections evolve over time, for example, as people's relations with those dissimilar to them deepen and they begin to consider themselves to share common ground. Also, connections in one area, such as bonds, can lead to connections with others, as individuals introduce their peers to institutions or other people. Refugee families resettled in both diverse and less diverse areas had some bonding social connections with 'people like me'. While families in diverse areas mainly established these connections with local Arab communities or well-established Syrian families, families in less diverse areas had fewer such connections and were more likely to bond with people via social media.

In some cases, and particularly in the less diverse areas, close bonds were said to have developed between some of the volunteers and refugee adults. These enabled access to emotional, cultural, and social resources beyond those offered by the group in general. Such connections helped refugee women overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness. Empathy and understanding from volunteers helped respondents to feel that they had friends on whom they could depend.

In some groups, volunteers were acutely aware of the need for refugees to build connections with 'people like them'. They actively linked families with other refugee and/or Arab families who shared a language. Such connections could impact positively on refugee families' emotional wellbeing. Emotional support received from other refugees helped to overcome trauma, with most adults delighted to connect with people who understood them and what they had been through. These connections were important in the weeks after arrival when their language skills were basic.

It is nice to listen to people who speak the same language, after arriving and everything around you is so foreign (Female, 12 months in UK, less diverse area).

Yet not all respondents benefitted from 'match-making' services. Some were not consulted about their social needs and ended up being introduced to other adults who were quite dissimilar to them, leaving all parties feeling awkward and embarrassed. Some respondents received advice and support from other families from similar backgrounds, but they also welcomed being able to assist others. Scope to offer reciprocity is acknowledged to be important in refugee integration, because it helps build self-esteem⁴. However, relations between volunteers and refugees were often quite imbalanced with respondents finding few opportunities to help volunteers. Being able to offer support to another refugee family was welcomed.

*I was happy to help, we all went to support her when she gave birth to her baby
(Female, 18 months in UK, less diverse area).*

When respondents were unable to access 'people like them' or develop bonding relations with volunteers, they reported feeling isolated which exacerbated feelings of loss and homesickness. Lack of bonding connections hindered progress potentially undermining wellbeing and reducing opportunities to learn English and understand British culture.

I miss my family, my mum and sisters. My mum is very sick and I would like to be with her to help her just a bit. I asked Sophie whether my mum can come and get treated but my mum is too sick to travel (Female, 16 months in UK, less diverse area).

Some groups worked very hard to introduce respondents to local people through running events, such as food shares, encouraging refugees to make Middle Eastern dishes to share. These efforts were enjoyed and appreciated. Respondents also developed bridging relations with neighbours and local people. They wanted to see these relations deepen to emulate the kinds of relations they had enjoyed at home wherein they socialised and supported each other. However, it could be difficult to get beyond superficial relations no matter how hard respondents tried:

They are neutral, they do not socially mix. I would love to help. Last time, my neighbour was digging a tree nearby his house. I went and helped him. I felt relaxed and happy that I helped my neighbour. But, after that, I felt that nothing changed, the relationship continued formal, good morning and good afternoon (Male, 18 months in UK, less diverse area).

Relations with volunteers often remained as bridging relations. Some respondents described those relationships as a service provider relationship because of the lack of emotional support and connections between volunteers and refugees. Such relations were exacerbated by language barriers, but left respondents with a sense that the volunteers did not care about them. Some volunteers did not appear to notice how alone and unhappy refugees were, and as we noted above, respondents did not want to burden them with their troubles. The fact that volunteers did not notice their emotional pain or offer emotional support left some respondents feeling abandoned, even when lots of functional support was provided. Without appropriate connections refugees reported finding it difficult to feel like they belonged in the local area.

⁴ <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080%2F1369183X.2017.1341709>

I did not want to feel as if I was from nowhere, belonged to any country and that people look down upon me and my family (Female, 14 months in UK, less diverse area).

Linking connections, outside of the group, were established with organisations such as healthcare providers, charities, faith-based organisations, Jobcentres and schools. These connections were made by volunteers who brokered introductions and usually, for a while, continued to support respondents in their interactions. Such links were essential to support integration.

Culture

Respondents gradually encountered and learned about different aspects of British life, some of which were expected, and others a surprise. One of biggest differences related to work-life balance which was seen as being more formalised than in Syria or Iraq. Refugees were surprised that working life and scheduling seemed to dictate people's daily lives and that there were few opportunities for serendipitous encounters.

I am surprised that the daily routine of people in xxx is about working, working, working and not family first or having fun and happiness. I am surprised that shops and markets close early. This area is quiet, and I see the same faces every day for me there isn't anything that can entertain me here so I cannot have a social life (Female, 14 months in UK, less diverse area).

Respondents were surprised at the high level of acceptance of their culture and ways of dressing. They were impressed by British people's open-mindedness and the lack of discrimination, which was one of the main worries they had before arrival. This respondent explains:

I am surprised but also happy that although we are the only Muslims here people have not abused us for this. The law here is not to discriminate my faith this is amazing even in college they gave me a room to pray in (Female, 14 months in UK, less diverse area).

Integration is understood as a set of adaptation processes engaged in by refugees and minority communities. Many volunteers were keen to learn about refugees' cultures and encouraged interchange and exchange of knowledge. It was important for respondents that their culture was understood by volunteers as this facilitated communication and understanding. Misconceptions, assumptions, and stereotyping could hinder integration processes and undermined trust. Some respondents recalled incidents that had caused them embarrassment such as volunteers talking about a pregnancy that would not normally be openly discussed in the refugee's home community as it was considered a private matter. There was also a tendency to assume that all Middle Eastern culture was the same and rely on interpreters from completely different countries to interpret the customs of refugees rather than asking respondents themselves. Respondents expressed a desire to answer questions about their culture, including aspects such as why they wore a hijab, and were disappointed that volunteers seemed wary of enquiring.

Respondents said that their lives were more slow-paced in Syria and Iraq than in Western countries. They were surprised at the fast pace, regimentation, especially around the working day, and had to learn how to deal with expectations around time and punctuality. They were used to living in tight knit communities with neighbours and community playing an important role in everyday lives. Refugees found British people more reserved and friendly but distant and quiet.

It's surprising that this place is very quiet, the people are reserved to an extent, so it's hard to socialise with them if they don't want to (Female, 12 months, diverse area).

However, they generally found British people to be helpful and pleasant. Although some had been unable to form deep friendship relations with neighbours and acquaintances, they were frequently offered help by these people. Given the ways respondents had been treated in the years they spent waiting for resettlement, many felt unvalued and powerless. Respondents discussed how their dignified treatment in the UK had made them feel appreciated, or at least wanted, and had reinforced a sense of belonging.

In their home countries, adults over 60 are considered elderly and lead slower life styles. Respondents were surprised at how active older people were in Britain, but older refugees struggled with expectations that they be as active as older volunteers when they expected, at their age, to be winding down. Some said they were tired after many years of hardship and perpetually worried about their family overseas. Such concerns sapped their energy leaving them unable to meet the expectations of the volunteers.

Gender issues

Gender dynamics in the UK were somewhat of a surprise to respondents, most of whom were used to a situation where men are the breadwinners and decision makers. Given that many volunteers are women, some male respondents found it difficult to connect with them. The lack of male volunteers with whom to build relationships and discuss their problems could exacerbate feelings of isolation and impotency. The absence of a male figure in some groups undermined the development of networks. On the other hand, women respondents needed to connect to women volunteers and quite frequently built strong relationships that crossed generations.

Chapter 6:

Hopes and fears

Like everyone else, refugee families have hopes and dreams, but also concerns about the future. For many, coming to the UK and finally being safe was a dream come true. They aspired to be self-supporting, for their children to be happy and successful and to be reunited with their families. In this chapter we explore some of refugees' hopes for and fears about the future.

Getting work

The top priority for all male respondents was accessing work, ideally in which they can use the knowledge and expertise that they brought with them. Some sought to establish their own business. Overall, we found that respondents wished to recapture a little of their past through following a similar path in the future.

I plan to start a Syrian restaurant with my wife. I want the restaurant to be embedded in the community and want to have people come in and socialise with them. Back home in xxx everyone knew me because I was very social and involved with the community, which I will be very happy to realise this dream again here (Male, 18 months in UK, less diverse area).

Being settled

Having been on the move and unsettled for many years, respondents talked about their desire to stay in one place. They dreamed about owning their own home one day, as they had before exile, so that they and their children could feel secure.

I wish that I had my own place here. It is draining and exhausting to think there is 6 months, there is 5 months... left before we move. That's why it is very important to work, to be able to afford our own place. It is my wish to do that and settle. I have mentioned how important family is, and so is settling (Female, 12 months, diverse area).

Part of being settled was having a social network akin to that 'back home'. Respondents desired deep and meaningful friendships with both 'British' people, which generally meant white British people like neighbours and volunteers, and other Arabs. Those who had already built some connections felt optimistic that they would achieve their social aspirations, but individuals who continued to feel isolated after 12 months began to lose hope that they would ever feel connected.

Having experienced the shock of war and a lengthy period of instability prior to resettlement, some respondents were left feeling insecure. They could not believe that they were safe and feared being deported and becoming refugees again. The fact that their leave to remain was only for five years was a source of uncertainty which undermined ability to settle.

But if potentially a situation arises where we feel like we will be unable to remain here be forced to leave. It could be something legal, from the government or such. We have had a lot of experiences in the past like that, so it is something we are scared of (Female, 12 months in UK, diverse area).

Education

Young adults, whose education had been interrupted by conflict, talked of their desire to complete their education. Many had a strong sense of the career direction they wished to follow.

Success is always to be happy and calm. Making friends and then having a career, by completing university and working as an interior designer (Female, 18 months in UK, less diverse area).

Giving something back

Respondents talked about their desire to pay back what they had received from their group and wider community. They hoped to become active citizens who can give back through volunteering.

From coming here, I said that this country has opened its doors for me, I am very thankful. As soon as I arrived here, I've felt like a part of this country. I am thankful for the British government, the British people. I am very thankful. I am here with my family, and there are many Syrians who continue to come here. It has opened its doors, unlike many other countries that have closed their doors to Syrians. I am thankful for the opportunity to stand on my feet, to live, and work here for this country (Male, 9 months in UK, diverse area).

Other respondents wanted to help newly arrived refugees to settle and find their way in the UK.

Family reunification

All respondents wanted to be reunited with other family members such as parents and siblings, and in many cases had not seen their loved ones for many years. This issue was always at the forefront of their minds and was a major source of worry. Respondents felt it was not possible to fully integrate while they were separated, especially where their family continued to be in danger or live in poor conditions.

Of course. It's impossible to integrate 100%. Unless I had a brother or a sister here. There's an Arabic proverb, there is nothing more protective than the outer skin of the wood on a stick. There may be a time when your partner might leave, but for instance. However your sibling will never leave you (Male, 4 months in UK, diverse area).

The thought that they may not see their family again or that they were unable to help was their biggest concern. Many broke down in tears when talking about their longing to meet their families again.

But I feel like I have something that makes me extremely sad, it makes me cry daily. I just want to see my family. I just wish, and I tell my husband, that we can't go to them. But what are these difficult circumstances that prevent me from seeing my mother and father, and siblings (Female, 12 months in UK, diverse area).

Children

Respondents' fears about their children were two-fold. On the one hand they worried about them losing their identity, ability to speak Arabic and knowledge or traditions. They feared this might lead to cleavages between them and their children but also that children would lose their ability to connect with family living overseas. They also feared that they and their children might be bullied or discriminated against for being different. Two families had experience of their children being bullied, which was particularly disturbing for them as they had believed that they had brought their children to safety at last.

I am worried for my children. My daughter wear hijab and in her class one time a boy came up to her and asked her whether she knew her own hair colour. I am worried that she will be harassed and teased by her peers. I was really annoyed with this and did not tell the group. I am worried when they grow into teenagers (Male, 16 months in UK, less diverse area).

Going home and British citizenship

Only five respondents wanted to return home to their country of origin once if peace was achieved. They wanted to return to the life they had. In the meantime, they focused upon personal development.

All respondents spoke of wishing to become British citizens. For them this was the ultimate goal and a signifier of being settled and safe in the UK. Respondents believed that after they obtained citizenship, they would be able to visit family members overseas, particularly their elderly parents or extended family still in refuge countries. To them, citizenship represented the freedom which they had long lost.

Citizenship for the children and myself means that we will be working and provide for ourselves independently, to come and go as we please. And to be able to bring my parents to places like Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan. To be able to see them, hopefully by then my circumstances allow me to go and do that (Female, 12 months in UK, diverse area).

Chapter 7:

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings presented in this report are based on interviews undertaken with refugees resettled to the UK under the CSS between 2018 and 2020. Our data is intended to offer some insight from the perspectives of refugee adults about their experiences since arrival in the UK, the support that they have received, the challenges and the pleasures encountered since arrival, as well as their hopes and fears for the future. On the whole, respondents reported positive experiences, but with some differences in evidence between men and women and those living in diverse and less diverse areas. Respondents recognised the amount of work that volunteers put into supporting them and were hugely appreciative of their efforts. These feelings of gratitude could make them reluctant to raise any concerns. This report has highlighted some of the strengths and weaknesses of the scheme from the perspective of refugees. There is much to celebrate particularly in relation to the levels of support refugees have received from volunteers and the warmth of welcome that exceeded expectations, but there is also clear potential for improvement, particularly in terms of clarifying expectations, improving language training, facilitating economic activity, building social connections and enabling access to family reunion. In the remainder of this report we focus on recommendations which could help improve CSS for refugees and have a positive impact on refugee integration processes.

Recommendations

Before departure

1. Provide information about the CSS and what it means to be resettled under the scheme
2. Provide much more detailed information about the onward location including details about the location of the UK vis a vis mainland Europe, about the nature of the relocation area, and facilities that are available, and about the nature of the local population.
3. Offer refugee families the possibility of turning down a placement that they feel is not suitable for them, reassuring them that they will be offered others.
4. Refugees should be advised before they come to the UK that they will need to learn English before accessing work and that this will take time.
5. Refugees should be very clearly advised before they agree to resettlement in the UK about the likelihood and associated timeframes of family reunion.

6. 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).
7. Volunteers should familiarise themselves with Reset's guidance on family reunification⁵ and be prepared to discuss with refugees' options and limitations.
8. Families may also ask about travelling to mainland Europe to visit family members – training for CSS groups should cover how to signpost refugees to organisations that can help them apply for Convention Travel Documents.
9. If placing refugees in remote areas, ensure that settlement plans engage with transport provision.

On arrival

10. Continue the tradition of groups meeting refugees at airports and offering welcomes in Arabic and stocking up houses with food, clothes, and toys.
11. Recruit more male volunteers who can befriend refugee men.
12. CSS groups should continue to offer one to one support and tailored help with language and education catch up ideally sharing good practice with Reset.
13. Groups should budget to ensure that ample interpretation is provided in the first few months, ideally from both male and female interpreters.
14. Volunteers should familiarise themselves with Reset's extensive guidance on finding and working with interpreters, including those who can provide interpreting face to face or by telephone.⁶
15. 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 be mindful of the pressures that could be placed on that volunteer.⁷
16. Volunteers should work with interpreters prior to the family's arrival to ensure they understand the purpose and framework of the CSS.
17. Reset offer a range of resources for day to day communication, including a list of basic phrases in English and Arabic <https://training-resetuk.org/toolkit/working-with-refugees/planning-arrival/common-arabic-words-and-phrases> which groups will find useful alongside the use of online platforms.

In the longer term

18. Offer language learning activities that enable small successes, so that adults do not lose hope, and recognise that ESOL classes in their current form may not be effective for some refugees.

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

⁶ See <https://training-resetuk.org/toolkit/working-with-refugees/empowering-refugees/interpreting-options>

⁷ See https://training-resetuk.org/sites/default/files/toolkit-files/2019-03/2.6.7_volunteer_interpreters.pdf

19. Provide volunteering facilities and opportunities for refugees to reciprocate to group members to rebalance power relations.
20. Encourage volunteers to ask questions about refugees' cultures so that they can understand them better.
21. Educate volunteers about gender relations and the importance of not discussing matters such as pregnancy without seeking permission first.
22. 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.
23. Volunteers should seek additional training on the benefits system available in their local area and make use of Reset's guidance on accessing benefits.⁸ In addition, they should seek further insight on the realities of surviving on benefits.
24. Groups should be prepared to use the DWP Refugee Group Leads Network if the family they support have difficulties accessing benefits⁹
25. Reset has produced extensive guidance on accessing employment¹⁰ – volunteers should be made aware of this and also offered more extensive training on how to help refugees gain work after the group have received a family.
26. Encourage volunteers to ask refugees what they want and need and thus to draw them into discussions about future support.
27. Volunteers should ensure that refugees have adequate access to digital equipment and the skills to use it paying attention to those with low levels of education.
28. Where donations are made by the group to the family, ensure these are given with dignity, to avoid refugees feeling that they are impoverished.
29. Encourage groups to look out for the emotional wellbeing of refugee adults and work with them to find ways to help them build networks.
30. Provide additional support to help teenagers reintegrate into education.

Help to reduce isolation

31. In rural areas where public transport is poor, volunteers should plan to support refugees to take their driving test and acquire a car.
32. Many refugees appreciate the events arranged around them and introduction to local groups however once the introductions are made groups should not be disappointed if refugees do not pursue all connections.
33. Social life is especially important to refugee integration. Dropping in to visit refugees, arranging community events and leisure activities are important ways to help refugees to connect with local people.
34. When refugee adults are isolated volunteers should work with them to explore ways to help build 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.

⁸ Available <https://training-resetuk.org/toolkit/working-with-refugees/learning-about-benefits>

⁹ <https://training-resetuk.org/toolkit/working-with-refugees/learning-about-benefits/working-with-jobcentres>

¹⁰ <https://training-resetuk.org/toolkit/working-with-refugees/answering-key-questions/accessing-employment>

35. Some groups have organised “holiday exchanges” with other groups to enable families to visit refugees in other locations. Others have used their CSS networks to connect families and support the development of friendship networks.

Family Reunion

36. Volunteers should familiarise themselves with [Reset’s guidance on family reunification](#) and be prepared to have an open discussion about the options available and also the limitations in terms of assistance that can be offered.
37. Families may also ask about travelling outside the UK to visit family members who have been resettled elsewhere – training for CSS groups should cover applying for Convention Travel Documents and what support refugees will need to apply.
38. 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).
39. The Home Office should look at the possibility of connecting the MRS and CSS to provide a route to family reunion co-supported by groups and refugees.
40. Consider introducing a named sponsorship programme to enable CSS groups to sponsor a second family related to their first thereby facilitating family reunion.