Community sponsorship and the pandemic: approaches to providing digital support for refugees

The Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS) was introduced in the UK in July 2016 to enable community groups to support the resettlement of refugee families. The Community Sponsorship approach relies heavily on the provision of face to face support to enable refugees to settle, thrive and integrate in the UK. Such support is provided by volunteers, the majority of whom are retired or semi-retired (Phillimore and Reyes 2019). With the advent of the pandemic and introduction of social distancing and lockdown measures in March 2020, Community Sponsorship groups were challenged to offer support to refugees in new ways. With some volunteers and refugees needing to shield and many services moving to remote provision, groups faced a situation very different to that for which they had planned.

Having previously undertaken an independent evaluation of the UK's Community Sponsorship Scheme (see Phillimore, Reyes-Soto and Hasan, 2020) and identified the importance of the intensive support offered in person by volunteers to refugees, the Community Sponsorship research team at IRiS identified a knowledge gap in the strategies adopted to meet refugee needs under pandemic conditions. The team reached out to Community Sponsorship groups currently supporting at least one refugee family to explore the challenges they faced and how they had addressed these challenges. Some 21 groups agreed to be interviewed, each nominating a representative of whom 17 were women and 4 men. Seven groups were located in urban settings, eight in semi-urban and six in rural locations. Eleven of the groups could be characterised as faith based and ten as secular. The majority of the groups interviewed received their families between 2019 and 2021. This briefing draws on the findings from that report to consider how digital technology might be made more accessible to CSS supported refugees.

Provision of information, advice and guidance

The emergence of the pandemic placed everyone in a new situation which generated high levels of fear and uncertainty. Access to accurate and up-to-date information, advice and guidance was essential to enable people to stay safe and to manage anxiety levels. Advice and legislation changed on an almost daily basis and it was hard to understand even for those able to use digital devices, and to read and to speak English. As the pandemic emerged and evolved volunteers realised that many refugees faced language barriers or were unable to access information digitally. In order to comply

with pandemic rules and to stay safe, refugees needed accessible information quickly. Without this groups were placed in the stressful position of trying to communicate about the pandemic with refugees, even though volunteers themselves were often confused and anxious. Some felt let down by the Government because they were not provided with the materials they needed in order to communicate with the family they were supporting. Some groups tried to access emergency interpretation to explain the situation and associated measures to refugees and were concerned that refugees were accessing inaccurate information via social media.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Up to date information, advice and guidance should be offered in key refugee languages on an easy to access platform.**

- **A national 'hotline' might be available in different languages to share information with those who are not literate, digitally literate or able to communicate in English.**

- **Doctors of the World offered information in multiple languages. Signposting volunteers to these materials would have helped them to connect refugees with the information needed.**

Supporting refugees to access digital resources

Under pandemic conditions many services moved from face to face to virtual provision. Basic ability to use digital technology was required in order to access services which, for some refugees, included vital healthcare and welfare services. Under normal circumstances refugees would gradually learn how to get online through one to one support with volunteers. In the pandemic volunteers, many of whom were themselves not particularly digitally competent, had to find ways to teach refugees how to access

services online, that did not break pandemic regulations. These included trying to teach such skills via Skype and WhatsApp calls in English. With many services shifting semi-permanently or partially online it continues to be important to develop refugees' digital competency. Digital competency should be a priority for newly arrived refugees, but it is important for service providers to be cognisant of the need to continue face to face services, phone calls and use of printed letters for individuals who struggle to access virtual services. In thinking about supporting refugees to get online the following could be considered.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Hiring Arabic speaking trainers to teach refugees digital skills.**

- **Provision of IT training while teaching English to accelerate the acquisition of both competencies.**

- **Developing a platform to upload educational materials around using digital services in multiple refugee languages.**

Addressing the digital divide

The term 'digital divide' is used to describe exclusion from information technologies. Pandemic conditions meant refugees who were unable to get online because they did not have access to devices or connectivity experienced a break in their education. Refugees needed to access hardware suitable for home study and enough data or bandwidth to ensure capacity for multiple users. Volunteers moved quickly to try to identify the resources needed but this was a struggle under pandemic conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **A Zoom call can use up to 0.8GB of data an hour, meaning that an hour's video call each week will use a 2GB monthly data**

plan. Refugees require a good broadband connection to ensure enough capacity data for remote education for multiple users.

- **The 'Get help with technology' scheme which provides help to disadvantaged pupils could be extended to refugee families to ensure they acquire adequate devices and Internet.**
- **Refugees adults participating in ESOL courses and teenagers learning online need use of a printer**.

Wellbeing support

The mental health of many people has deteriorated during the pandemic. Yet many refugees were already experiencing psychological problems associated with experiences of conflict, loss and isolation. The advent of lockdown was overwhelming for refugees already struggling with trauma. Groups introduced refugees to activities such as gardening and birdwatching to help support wellbeing, but such resources were not available to all. Special measures are needed to help support refugee wellbeing both during pandemic conditions and as we emerge from the pandemic.

Recommendations:

- **The provision of online mental health services in refugee languages would enable refugees to quickly access care.**
- **CS sponsors and volunteers should identify social, cultural and leisure activities accessible in their communities and online and support refugees to get involved to improve their wellbeing.**
- **CS sponsors could encourage the creation of a network with mental health charities and other partners to improve the delivery of services for refugees experiencing trauma.**

To see the full report 'Community Sponsorship Scheme: Supporting refugees and volunteers during the Covid-19 pandemic' click the link: https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/iris/2021/supporting-refugees-and-volunteers-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-general-report.pdf

Toolkit with resources for use during and beyond the Covid-19 Pandemic: https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/iris/2021/toolkit-with-resources.pdf

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