

# Community Sponsorship Scheme

Supporting refugees and  
volunteers during the COVID-  
19 pandemic

**Dr Marisol Reyes-Soto and Professor Jenny Phillimore**

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM



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## **Contact**

Dr Marisol Reyes-Soto [M.Reyes@bham.ac.uk](mailto:M.Reyes@bham.ac.uk)

## **For further information**

For further research outputs and lots of other useful material on the UK's Community Sponsorship Scheme visit <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/superdiversity-institute/community-sponsorship-evaluation/index.aspx>

## INTRODUCTION

As refugee situations have increased in scope, scale and complexity, there has been an increased recognition of the need to expand the size of refugee resettlement programmes (UNHCR 2019). While projected global resettlement needs have reached more than 1.4 million in 2020, only 55,680 refugees submitted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were resettled in 2018 (UNHCR 2020). Expanding access to third country solutions is one of four objectives set out in the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR 2018). Building on modest existing resettlement programmes launched in the 2000s, the United Kingdom is among the countries which have committed to further developing their resettlement programmes.

The UK's Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS) was introduced as part of this commitment in 2016 and since then nearly 500 refugees in around 65 families, have been resettled. Once a group's application to receive a family is approved the family is dispersed to them on a no-choice basis. The group must meet certain criteria, including securing appropriate funds and housing and being able to demonstrate how they will support integration. The minimum formal responsibility to support the family lasts for one year, with responsibility for housing lasting two years, after which time the sponsoring group can choose how much support they offer.

The CSS programme was conceived as a face to face endeavour with interpersonal relations at its core. Refugees gain from ready-made social networks with volunteers providing intense social support. Underpinning the implementation of the programme in the UK is the assumption that personalised social support will accelerate the integration and settlement process (Phillimore and Reyes 2019). Such social networks are expected to facilitate integration across other areas such as employment, language learning and development of cultural knowledge.

In March 2020 with the advent of the coronavirus pandemic CSS groups were confronted with the challenge of moving all of their support for refugee families online. The research team identified an urgent need to know, before the learning is lost, how groups adapted during the COVID-19 crisis and what strategies have been adopted to meet refugee needs in order to ensure that innovation can be built and to help support the development of new practices. Assessing and recording learning that has taken place during the pandemic offers new ways of working that groups may adopt post-pandemic given that findings from our evaluation of the CSS (Phillimore et al 2020) identified that refugees struggled to access language classes, afford to exercise, and tuition of children plus groups could not afford sufficient interpretation because of the travel costs associated with face to face interpretation.

This report outlines some of the key findings from the research undertaken between January and March 2021, during this time, health safety measures, legal requirements to stay at home and restrictions implemented by the UK government remained in place. The views and opinions of the participants interviewed for this study reflect their experience supporting refugees from March 2020 onwards.

## AIMS OF THE STUDY

The main focus of this project is on collating, making sense of and then presenting the learning that has taken place during the pandemic. The specific objectives of this study are:

- To identify the challenges CS groups faced in supporting refugees during the pandemic
- To document the online mechanisms, they used to provide support and the effectiveness of those mechanisms
- To examine how these mechanisms can be used to supplement and optimise the support that CSS groups are able to offer post-pandemic
- To collate digital resources and material recommended by participants for supporting refugees

## METHOD

Some 78 Community Sponsorship groups were contacted by email and telephone from January to March 2021. Contact information of the group was identified searching in social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, as well as the websites of Citizens UK-Sponsor Refugees and RESET Communities and Refugees. Additional information was obtained from contacts made in our earlier evaluation research.

Potential participants were informed about the main goal and characteristics of the study through an informative letter. Twelve groups answered that they had not received their sponsored family yet and 21 groups accepted the invitation. The individuals who accepted to participate in the study were contacted by telephone to undertake interviews of approximately 50 minutes duration.

A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was adopted to ensure an in-depth understanding of the experiences and changes faced by the groups during March 2020 and March 2021. Data obtained from the interviews was analysed with a systematic thematic approach to identify findings which address the project objectives. Ethical approval was granted as part of the wider Community Sponsorship body of work undertaken by the team and protocols were followed around provision of information and gaining informed consent.

## SAMPLE

In total 21 individuals were interviewed, 17 women and 4 men. They belong to 21 groups from which 7 were located in urban settings, 8 in semiurban and 6 in rural locations. 11 groups were characterised as faith based and 10 as secular. Some 17 groups had sponsored one family and four were resettling two families (see Table 1). The majority of the groups interviewed received their families between 2019 and 2021 (see Table 2).

Table 1

<b>Groups' characteristics</b>	<b>Categories</b>		
<b>Location</b>	Urban	Semiurban	Rural
	7	8	6
<b>Profile</b>	Religious	Secular	
	11	10	
<b>Gender</b>	Women	Men	
	17	4	
<b>Number of families supported</b>	One family	Two families	
	17	4	

Table 2

<b>Year of arrival</b>	<b>Number of families</b>
2017	1 family
2018	6 families
2019	14 families
2020	1 family
2021	3 families

## FINDINGS

The following section describes the key finding identified from the participants' experiences. They were thematically classified based on similarities of patterns, and a summary of each theme is highlighted inside the boxes.

### Volunteers and volunteering

**Key finding 1: All groups had to move support online when pandemic restrictions were implemented. Most volunteers had some digital skills, the majority were competent using conventional software and communication apps. Groups with IT competent volunteers were helped to set up software and hardware. Elderly volunteers were less familiar with digital technology but participation in meetings was facilitated by moving them online. Virtual connections helped volunteers to stay involved and to find sense of purpose during lockdown.**

- The majority of the CSS groups experienced a dropped off in their membership since March 2020. Many groups have volunteers over 70 who were classified as being most at risk from the virus. They were advised to shield by the government and minimise all face-to-face contact. Groups heavily reliant in elderly volunteers mentioned felt there was a lack of support from the authorities during the pandemic and had to find their own way forward.

*"A lot of us are retired, including myself. And so, it means that we are dealing with a relatively small number of us who have ever committed to a project, where with the COVID pandemic coming along, we are ourselves actually quite vulnerable. So, it means that for all of us, and I would apply this to myself too, we have to be very careful about how much we're actually able to interact in day to day terms"* Male Urban

- Lack of volunteers made difficult to share important practical tasks for those groups who received their families during the pandemic, like the preparation of the house. When allowed, some groups designated one single volunteer as the *support bubble* with the household of the refugee family, hence work fell on a few members of the team.
- Virtual meetings became more inclusive for disabled or vulnerable volunteers, and some groups reported a bigger turnout than in person meetings.

*"I think it's from a group's perspective, it is easier to get more people at team meetings. Because beforehand, we'd have most of our meetings in, like on an evening, but you know, often people were out and you'd only get maybe two thirds of the group who could make it you know, where it's now because people don't need to leave their homes, it's been easier to do that"* Female Rural

- The restrictions associated to the pandemic forced groups to work more efficiently and use more technological resources to replace or supplement their support

towards the refugee families.

- Group leaders stressed the relevance of being more mindful of the wellbeing of their team members to reduce burnout and psychological distress.

*“So, I think volunteers and schemes, you know, they've got to look after themselves, as well as the family. You know, because if people burn out, then they weren't used to anyone. You know, and I think it's important for the project leader to keep a good tab on how the rest of the team are doing”* Male Suburban

**Key finding 2: Face to face support for refugees was disrupted. Most groups provided new/more digital equipment to refugee families. Several refugee adults had few digital skills and required support to use basic equipment. Volunteers found teaching refugees how to set up emails, manage information and to access online services challenging especially as some of this teaching had to happen remotely. Online education for teenagers and adults was difficult. Groups in rural areas benefited from emerging online resources and remote support.**

- Newcomer refugees not literate in their own language needed most support to use digital technology. Some CSS groups had to start from scratch and teach their refugee families how to access Zoom remotely. They also had to support them with relevant actions like paying service bills, accessing information from email, or arranging online appointments with the GP or the Job Centre.

*“But we primarily concentrated on trying to set up an online forum for providing the lessons and we are using Zoom. It wasn't easy, because I had to teach them how to access it, set it up and trying to do that from a desk. It's when you weren't with them to show them what to do. As I'm sure you realise it's quite tricky. It took us a while to get it set up properly, but we did in the end”* Female Urban

- Online education in schools has been a big learning curve for the CSS groups and refugee families. Many groups reported that young children at primary level were accepted as vulnerable students and returned to school during the second and third lockdowns, however, many teenagers did not have the same support and they had to take online courses. Some groups opted for providing supplementary education with private tutors, especially for those students who had GCSE exams or were in advanced years.
- Many refugee adults stopped to take ESOL courses because moving to online sessions was very difficult. Some were not familiar with virtual classrooms and found working virtually extremely challenging. Some had to print the worksheets and did not have a printer. Many CSS groups opted to offer one to one virtual ESOL sessions run by volunteers.
- Rural CSS groups reported to be benefited from the expansion of the digital resources online as they gained access to new material, virtual sessions, and training that was often difficult to access from their remote locations.



- CSS groups valued the weekly briefing organised by the charity RESET as a virtual space where emerging and established groups have been able to exchange information, knowledge and experiences.

*“So weekly briefings from Reset which have been very useful as well as sort of a lunchtime briefing and or something that, you know, there may be 30, 40, 50 people online, I can tailor each on a different topic and a combination of new groups who are just going through the application process, but also groups who just welcomed a family. That experience has been very valuable” Female Urban*

**Key finding 3. The development of relationships between volunteers and refugee families was interrupted due to lack of personal contact. Some groups found it difficult to explain to refugees that social distancing rules were enshrined by the UK government.**

- The interpersonal relations of trust and friendship established between the CSS volunteers and the refugee families is at the heart of the scheme. Participants reported that building relationships with the family was affected by the lack of personal contact.

*“The biggest challenge is trying to support them remotely. whereas previously, we would have suited to them in their home or met them face to face. I think this is a bit of a subjective comment, but I think I've noticed that the relation has been affected. I think it's just been harder to relate to them and get a feel for where they're at online. Even though we've used apps for we can see them, you don't get the same sort of personable things going on. So, it's been harder for us to know whether they're okay or whether they're not okay. And it's been very hard then to deal with challenges when they've come” Female Urban*

- Some volunteers struggled to engage in difficult conversations online because communication does not enable the use the body language to help overcome the language barrier.
- Different groups experienced difficulties in explaining the seriousness of the situation to the refugee families because in the eyes of some the pandemic seems minor after their experience of living in, and fleeing from, conflict.

*“For our group the most significant challenge has been explaining to the family the relevance and implications of the pandemic. During the first lockdown Dad thought that the government was overreacting. In his mind Covid was a hoax. When we told them that we were not allowed to visit them inside their house, they just couldn't understand it and pressured volunteers to get inside” Male Suburban*

**Key finding 4. The pandemic had a financial impact as donations and fund raising activities slowed down or ceased. Some groups made savings as services such as interpretation were cheaper online. Most groups used professional interpreters to explain public health information, and pandemic rules and restrictions to refugees.**

- Due to the outbreak of covid-19 all the fundraising programmes and donations obtained for financing the resettlement actions of the CSS groups were much reduced. This situation affected volunteers' motivation and groups' momentum.

*"I think our supporters have felt rather distant to the project. We have particularly noticed a drop in income as a result of the pandemic, and I think it's just that distance. It's hard to keep that close proximity to a project that you're passionate about if you're not physically involved. So, I think that's affected our group. And the planning group has had a lot less because we're not planning, and we just reduced our actions to just support the families instead of the wider things that we tend to do in the town"* Female Suburban

- Interpretation during the pandemic has been a priority in order to accurately explain to the families official information about health, safety and new regulations. This represented a high cost for those groups of newly arrived refugees who required intensive and in person support during the first months.
- Professional interpretation for refugee families who have been living in the UK for more than 24 months was supplemented only in case of complex medical appointments and emergencies. For regular communication with volunteers use translation devices and apps as needed.

## Refugees

**Key finding 5. The digital competence of refugees who have been living in the UK for more than 24 months was markedly better than newer arrivals. Such refugees had more experience finding support and navigating online services.**

- Some refugees had to learn to use the computer from scratch, which was particularly difficult for individuals who are not literate and are just starting to learn English. Adult refugees found engaging with online systems very difficult.

*"So, you have to treat them almost like kind of how you would teach a child how to use a computer. So even kind of using a mouse and making the mouse move and click on something, you know, it's been... we've had to teach them everything from scratch, really. And I think that's been a major struggle because there's so much in this country that is online"* Female Suburban

- Some refugees were not able to access healthcare via telephone because they were not able to explain their symptoms in English and were in the need of an interpreter. One group reported that a refugee had to attend the A&E in person for medical attention.

*"Everything sort of was happening over the phone in the first lockdown. And so, it was just proving very challenging, really to try and set up an appointment because you know, even if you phoned up, the person concerned to talk through the symptoms, like we can't do that, you know, because he doesn't speak English. So, in the end, actually, what worked was he took himself off to A&E. And we had an interpreter standing by on, you know, on the phone, so that they could interpret rather fine"* Female Suburban

- Under current circumstances refugees have the incentive to learn how to use new communication apps and online resources to navigate the service system.

**Key finding 6. Pandemic restrictions meant groups could not implement their resettlement plans and integration processes were disrupted.**

- Those refugees who had jobs or were volunteering experienced a sudden interruption of their activities that affected their integration experience and language development.

*“Before the pandemic, the Dad had just got a part time job. So of course, his work stopped, and he was furloughed. Mum, who never worked, had started as a volunteer in a charity shop, which she thoroughly enjoyed. And of course, that closed. So, all of a sudden, they were just the four of them in the house and not being able to speak English to other people and keep developing. So, the language kind of plateaued”* Female Urban

- Some volunteers identified mental health issues in refugees, or the exacerbation of existing ones due to fear of the pandemic, isolation and intensified worry about their family members living in Syria or abroad.

*“The family has been exceptionally isolated through the pandemic. Like hardly gone out the sphere of Coronavirus. I have had some worries about them. Not socialising is not having anything in their life. And just worried about their long term mental wellbeing, I have no evidence that there is the only damage, but I'm just worried about it”* Female Suburban

- Participants reported that isolation was particularly acute for female refugees. Many of them concentrated their attention on taking care of their families and housekeeping. Frequently female refugees refused to leave their houses and declined to even walk with the volunteers.
- Illiterate adults found very difficult to concentrate during online lessons and some of them asked volunteers to restart the English classes after lockdown, when they would be able to have face to face classes.

*“And I think what we found is that, especially the parents don't have, they can't concentrate for not very long on the computer. So, before the pandemic, they were having two hour lessons, you know, each day, and actually, the teachers quickly found that the parents were unable to concentrate for more than an hour on the computer. So, we've had to kind of, yeah, do short, shorter lessons”* Female Rural

- Refugees keen to obtain a driving licence experienced the suspension of their driving lessons and the dates for the test were cancelled several times. One group started a campaign for demanding extra time between theory and practical driving tests postponed because of Covid.

**Key finding 7. Moving to online services and shopping saved money for refugees who did not have to pay for public transport to shops or appointments**

- For refugees who have family members with medical conditions and require systematic consultations with medical professionals the move to online appointments saved money in transportation. This was particularly beneficial for refugees located in remote areas.
- Some refugee families have learnt how to do their shopping online, which has been a great advantage for saving money in transportation and staying healthy.

*“They, you know, they set up an online shopping with Sainsbury's or somewhere. And they, they also found that the halal butcher would deliver meat to them” Female Urban*

**Key finding 8. Pandemic restrictions prevented groups from being able to legally enter refugees' homes. Some transgressions were necessary. Many groups used material in Arabic to explain basic information about the pandemic. A small number of refugees were reluctant to follow the government guidelines.**

- Some groups had to enter into the refugees houses during the pandemic restrictions because they had to sort out essential services like broken boilers or set up new digital equipment. Newly arrived refugees needed to sign tenancy agreements, and initial resettlement documentation when the family was in quarantine.
- One group with predominantly vulnerable volunteers struggled to find official information on how to take the home COVID test in Arabic, although RESET now has that information available on its website.

*“Back in July 2020 COVID testing could be done either by going to a centre, or by home COVID testing kits. Our family, first of all have been told they had to attend a COVID test. None of this was done entirely in English, so we had to explain to them. They could not go to a centre because you would like to go by taxi, because they don't have cars and we cannot drive them. Not to mention the language problems. So, we had to organise for a home COVID test, and all the instructions, everything is in English. The government had no resources, nothing about this. And I checked again and again online. In Arabic, absolutely nothing. I complained to reset UK, and they confirm that there was nothing in Arabic. There is no thought from the government about how any of this is impacting on refugee families who don't have any English”*

- Most of the groups were able to source information offering general advice and social and health recommendations translated by the NHS in Arabic. They printed the material and shared it with refugees who were literate.
- Two elderly refugees believed that the vaccine may be unnecessary, ineffective, or unsafe. One refugee refused to be vaccinated because of these concerns.
- Some refugee families did not let their children to attend school as they thought that it was not safe.

- Some refugees compared the restrictions in Britain with other countries and found that the situation in the UK was stricter.

*“Because they've got family in different countries now. And obviously, every country is dealing with the pandemic in a different way. And so, it's probably quite hard for them to understand that. You know, in the UK, this is how we're doing things even though in America and in Turkey and Jordan, it's very, very different”* Female Rural

**Key finding 9. Travel arrangements for resettling refugees were subject to severe disruptions when the Government placed resettlement arrivals on hold and introduced other restrictions. Groups were impacted by restrictions in different ways with delays in receiving a family or in achieving the goals set out in their resettlement plans.**

- Refugees whose families live in precarious conditions in other countries asked groups support them to travel to visit their families, however, volunteers had to explain that overseas travel was not possible.
- Groups who were expecting to receive their families during 2020 and had made housing arrangements had to ask the Home Office to support them to pay the rent.

*“We, we wrote to the home office a couple of times asking them to if they would make a contribution towards the rent, which we were okay paying the utilities, and they did contribute towards that, it was very helpful”* Male Urban

- Some volunteers said that the delays experienced in implementing their resettlement plans meant that families lost a year in which their integration could have progressed.

*“That's all part of the process of resettling think it just puts you back that, you know, I think, in some ways, it puts them back around some ways, in lots of ways. They've just been pulled back a year by this whole pandemic”* Female Suburban

## Innovations

**Key finding 10. The pandemic offered an opportunity for volunteers to identify new ways of providing support to refugees under adverse circumstances and to support the development of language and other skills.**

- In order to support refugees with their learning, some volunteers used open spaces to run English classes for children and adults.

*“Our head of education was able to open up the summer house in her garden. And various people went in and gave the children lessons. The teacher stood in the garden and the children sat in the summer house and the children sat in the gardens that were able to do better than on distance learning with them in that way”* Female Suburban

- The interruption of the ESOL courses for adult refugees was tackled by volunteers by providing sessions with their own team of former teachers and designing one to one sessions online.
- Groups identified creative ways to help refugees with basic online tasks. Two groups used screen shots with descriptive pictures to show how to set up email accounts, redeem electronic school vouchers, pay electronic bills, and access online schooling, etc.

*“A photo, it's fine, you know, you can have photo of what's on the screen, they can look at the photo, they can look at what they need to press, they can copy what you've written down to type in. It's visual”*  
Female Urban

- Another way of supplementing the education of the children and teenagers was to provide them with many books from different subjects and educational stages.
- Online weekly sessions were implemented to help adults to prepare for their driving test and to teach how to use driving theory test app.
- One volunteer wrote a guide to using WhatsApp in Arabic that was very helpful for communication with the family they supported.

*“And I've also written a sort of a guide to using WhatsApp in Arabic, which is, which is now being used nationally, I think, it has been used by the various organisations that help to support communities on how to use Arabic, even if you don't know Arabic you can find how to use WhatsApp with Arabic”* Male urban

**Key finding 11. Social and leisure activities played an important role in improving the wellbeing of refugees. These activities offered new ways to tackle stress, anxiety and isolation during lockdown.**

- Several volunteers encouraged their sponsored families to have regular outdoor walks as one of the easiest ways to improve their mental health, as well as helping them to stay active during lockdown.
- Some refugee families were introduced to new hobbies by volunteers like bird watching or gardening.

*“The family lives on the edges of this sort of a rural area and I discovered what I knew from early on, that they liked going for walks, and they were interested in nature. And so, I decided to teach them about birds. I helped them to identify some common birds so that they could look for them, and they could learn their names”* Female suburban

- An Arabic speaker volunteer from one group arranged a weekly phone call to catch up with the family. The conversation enabled an update the group about the family's situation and the opportunity to be sociable.

- Zoom birthday parties were organised by a CSS group to celebrate special occasions with the family and group members. This activity kept maintained group cohesion and supporting bonding between the family and volunteers.

*“For instance, when the children have a birthday, then one of the group always bakes a cake and delivers it to the house, and then we have a little zoom party for them with all the family and the team members”* Female Urban

- Children in a refugee family were encouraged to sing along with other children in virtual choirs. This activity helped expand their vocabulary and connect them with other children.
- A zoom language cafe to support conversational English encouraged virtual socialisation was organised for one group by volunteers who had been furloughed.

*“We’ve also started an online language cafe in which I’ve got a team of volunteers. I have actually recruited new volunteers during the pandemic, largely, which I’ve not been able to use, but they’re on the cover, I can’t introduce them to the families, but they volunteer online. I think some of those people were people who were furloughed”* Female Urban

- One teenager refugee was enrolled in a gaming tournament. This activity helped improve his self-confidence, communication, and team working skills while expanding his friendship group.
- A landowner offered a plot of land to a CSS group who used it for an allotment for the refugees they support. Engaging in outdoor activity was seen as having a positive effect on wellbeing.

*“... the father because his background is as a gardener and a landscaper, he does the garden at the church. And I volunteer at the local park. And he comes and volunteers whenever we are working in the park. So, they very much want to be part of the community”* Female Suburban

**Key finding 12. Female refugees expressed their desire to participate in women only activities. During lockdown some groups engaged in virtual activities designed for refugee women.**

- Online fitness and Pilates sessions were offered for female refugees enabling them to join classes without wearing a hijab. Women were reluctant to join a regular class with men, so volunteers provided women only sessions to help them keep active and have some respite from lockdown isolation.
- The charity Xenia provides workshops online for female refugees who want to learn English and get connected with other refugee women. Refugee women are paired with an English-speaking woman and jointly navigate language, activities and stories. One group used this service.
- Two groups enrolled female refugees in online Art work clubs and workshops run by professional artists.

*“Technology has saved us during this crisis. Despite the challenges and while we all moan about the endless Skype and Zoom the internet has allowed us to continue communicating in isolation. Initially, I was skeptical about how effective creative teaching would be online. I waded my way through the digital tools that enable users to design, draw and create while hosting a workshop. This meant being innovative with teaching tools, using multimedia to create meaningful sessions that yielded results”* Salma Zulfiqar artis from ART connects.

**Key finding 13. Several refugees gained more independence learning how to access and manage different services online.**

- Online medical consultations gave refugees a way to digitally contact their GP surgery and get health information, advice and help.

*“We have shown them how to access the health system. And to the point where now they can go for appointments on their own, if it's something quite simple, you know, they need access to the local clinic, then the mother can make an appointment on her own. She can use the NHS website to kind of check symptoms. And she had a medical problem herself in the summer. And one of my colleagues showed her how to use the access to the NHS website so that she could understand how to adjust her diet to help her with the with the problem that she was experiencing”* Female Urban

- Volunteers showed refugees how to access utility service websites, how to monitor readings and download utility company apps on their phones.
- Some schools asked students to redeem food electronic coupons and order meals online. Volunteers taught families to access these services.

**Key finding 14. The sudden shift to remote working forced some CSS groups to manage and organise their team in virtual ways. The pandemic forced some groups to manage refugees' expectations about the support they could offer.**

- One group introduced a WhatsApp online diary to record all the interaction with the family and communicate actions points enabling them to ensure that all their needs were met.

*“We have a sort of a semi formal reporting WhatsApp group, which everyone's a member of, and anyone who meets family is obliged to report that meeting on that group. And if there is anything that is needed, should be noted it there. And that is effectively a sort of an online diary. Then we have just a sort of a broader WhatsApp group for the extended membership, which is 20 plus people for extra support during the quarantine, so if the family run out of medication or anything anybody pop to the shops and buy supplies”* Male Rural

- One group revamped a code of conduct that they produced during the first stage of application and translated into Arabic so the family could be aware of their availability during the pandemic.

*“We have translated a code of conduct to give to the family, which explains who we are and what we will and won't do. You know, when we are not available 24 hours a day and, you know, we're available to a certain amount of time, a little less than an emergency, of course, and it just kind of sets out how we manage expectations”*



## DISCUSSION

### Challenges and learning

The Covid-19 pandemic was a huge test for the flexibility, management and creativity of the volunteers participating in the Community Sponsorship. For refugee families the pandemic entailed the need to rapidly adapt to a digitalised system of services and communications. All the CSS volunteers who participated in the study reported that the pandemic required their groups to find new ways to interact and support the refugee families. This learning process varied depending on the different levels of support required for the families and the ever-changing pandemic rules and regulations.

During the first months of the outbreak groups' main concern was to ensure the health and safety of the refugees with volunteers finding different ways to share with them public health advice and guidance. Some groups hired professional interpreters who contacted families by telephone or video conferences while other groups found and printed information translated into Arabic. As the pandemic continued it became evident that the CSS groups needed new ways of communicating and supporting families meaning they had to move to a virtual form of assistance. They had to provide equipment and develop digital skills that allowed volunteers and refugees to access essential services and information.

Those CSS groups dependent on elderly volunteers experienced the biggest challenges to move to digital support. Their vulnerability to the virus prevented face to face contact with refugees and they experienced a drop in membership. With little digital experience many volunteers learnt how to use communication applications and to access quite complex electronic platforms like the NHS online service or virtual schooling in Microsoft teams. Such resources were difficult to manage even for digitally competent individuals. Groups moved to virtual meetings which were found to be more inclusive and accessible especially for volunteers with mobility problems or living in remote places. Keeping volunteers connected virtually helped some who may have been isolated to find purpose during lockdown.

The epidemic was most problematic for those groups supporting families who have been in the UK for less than two years. To support their resettlement, groups had to find new ways to deliver planned activities. The most difficult activity was supporting with the education of the adult and teenagers refugees. Many adults had few digital skills and low levels of English language competency so required support to make basic use of digital devices. Women and older respondents had the weakest digital skills and young people the strongest. Volunteers produced creative resources like screenshots or videos to support refugees to go online.

CSS groups working with refugee families in the UK for more than 24 months reported they were in less need of support. Many already knew how to access services and were comfortable navigating the system without interpreters. They were more familiar with digital devices, communication applications, and networks and thus able to access and manage information. The proliferation of virtual services forced them to adapt faster and encouraged further independence. Volunteers nonetheless were careful to maintain contact making regular calls to check if they were safe and well.

The lengthy pandemic restrictions affected both wellbeing and integration processes. Participants identified that several families experienced increased levels of isolation, distress and anxiety. Refugees who started work or were learning to drive were said to be frustrated at being unable to get on with their lives. In response, volunteers enacted creative activities and encouraged refugees to try new hobbies, organised online social events and invited them for outdoor walks. Female refugees were enrolled in women-only virtual activities where they were able to socialise, improve their fitness and make new friends.

### Innovations

CSS volunteers have developed new practices to attempt to continue to support and empower refugees in the pandemic. Engaging with virtual communication systems kept groups members connected, and the shift to digital provision led groups to expand the reach of some virtual activities while reducing some costs. Examples include the use of virtual interpretation, offering online private tuition and recruiting refugees online.

The increasing digitalisation of the services has also helped refugees to cross over the digital divide. With the support of the CSS volunteers, they have learned valuable skills enabling access to the Internet and to communication technologies that enabled engagement in online lessons, training on employability skills, accessing services such as health or banking, and shopping online. The experience of rapidly adapting services under pandemic conditions have led groups to imagine that post-pandemic restriction they will adopt a hybrid model of support that will combine tasks which require in-person attention, with new modalities of virtual support when it is appropriate and more cost effective.

### Improving virtual support

The participants in this research identified some aspects that could be beneficial for improving the virtual support provided to the refugee families both during and after the pandemic.

- The government and local authorities could help refugees to get online by developing a programme with similar characteristics of the 'Get help with technology' that provides help to disadvantaged pupils to access remote education.
- Refugees require a good broadband connection to ensure capacity for multiple users.
- Refugees participating in ESOL courses and teenagers learning online need use of a printer.
- Refugees' digital competence could be accelerated if Arabic speaking trainers were hired to teach IT skills.
- Special attention should be paid to developing ways to support refugees who are not literate to get online
- A platform containing materials both created by groups and accessed via different websites and translated into refugee languages would provide groups with the resources needed to support refugee learning and wellbeing.
- A virtual programme teaching about life in the UK and basic conversational English offered by bilingual teachers would be very helpful to newly arrived refugees.
- Service providers need to remember that printed letters still have a role in communicating with groups such as refugees and that e-mails are not accessible to everyone.



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