

## VOICES Network Community Sponsorship Research

### Phase 2

#### Findings and recommendations.

##### Key insights

- **Arriving in the UK:** There is a Lack of accessible induction information on or before arrival in the families' own languages.
- **Benefits System and Work Opportunities:** Families report a lack of understanding the benefits system such as universal credit, housing benefits and council tax reductions and how best to find employment.
- **Education & Language:** The language barriers continue to be the most challenging element for most families and has a significant impact on their lives. College language classes alone are not sufficient for learning the language.
- **Family Reunion:** There is not a clear path for family reunion.
- **Health Care:** A Lack of accessible information understanding about the health care system in the UK can be confusing and frustrating.
- **Housing – Rural and Urban Areas:** Limited social connections and feeling of loneliness and isolation have been reported by those located in rural areas.
- **Training and Volunteering:** Families say there is a lack of volunteering, training and placement opportunities has resulting in limited job opportunities.
- **Translation and interpretation:** Families feel that the initial period of interpretation provision does not seem to be long enough.
- **Wellbeing and Social Connections:** Participants noted that limited social connection with the wider community has affected their wellbeing.

In this second phase of the research, we sought to build on and deepen our understanding of issues impacting Community Sponsored families by engaging a larger and more diverse group of participants. Phase one engaged 17 participants and phase two engaged 22 participants. All phase 2 participants were of Syrian origin. Nine men and thirteen women took part in the 4 sessions: one for men and three for women. A notable difference from phase 1 is the wider age span of participants as this phase included 2 grandparents and 2 young refugees aged 17. another difference is the gender split. While in the first phase 10 men and 7 women took part, in phase 2 we had almost twice as many women participating. No noticeable difference in the geographical coverage of participants with the majority being from the South East and South West of England and a few from Wales.

It was promising that 70% of phase two participants were working whereas only 30% of phase one participants were in work; however, participants still stressed the difficulty they faced in securing employment. High levels of employment positively impacted social and economic integration of phase two participants. the family members we met this time as well as reducing the detrimental impact of the language barrier of families through building social connections with their recruiters and enhanced their networks which enable some of them to move to better careers and gain better understanding of the job sector in the UK. For many of them, having a job has given them the confidence to speak the language and build social connections at work. In both stages feelings of loneliness and isolation were more evident in women than in men.

Young refugees are the most affected in the first few months of their resettlement where they need extra support to mitigate the impact of social exclusion especially at schools.

*'I felt excluded, I missed few exams at school because of language barrier, it was very difficult in the beginning'.*

Consistent with insights from phase one, the language barriers continue to be one of a key challenge that families are faced with, especially on and immediately after arrival. Compared to phase one, a high percentage of participants we met during this phase are putting in extra effort to enhance their level of English. Participants emphasised the need to introduce new approaches to language learning e.g., 1-to-1 language support or

considering an Arabic native speaker to assist families to access language resources and encourage families through a peer support approach.

Some families emphasised challenges around having insecure housing, including feelings of fear and frustrating with relocating to a new area after settling in housing with a fixed term tenancy.

The levels of financial support that groups can offer to families depends on the group and its resources in each area, which was confusing for some families. This support is a vital need for families during the early months following the family's arrival and the community sponsorship needs to appreciate the need to register families for Universal Credit with the job centre from day 1 of their arrival to avoid delays in accessing the state financial support.

Phase two participants further emphasised how work and volunteering opportunities play a crucial role in enhancing integration of families in their communities and help them to move on positively with their lives.

#### Co-production and participation:

One of the limitations of the first phase of the project was the time needed to identify and recruit participants. In phase two, we built on these relationships and recruited and trained phase one participants as VOICES Ambassadors. The VOICES Network Participation Officer collaborated and co-produced this research report with five VOICES Ambassadors (VAs) with lived experience of Community Sponsorship who took on Peer Research roles.

A Peer Research approach can enhance the richness of insight and participants are likely to respond more openly, resulting in higher quality of data with more depth and nuance. The peer research approach ensured we were better able to reach new participants by utilising VOICES Ambassadors' social networks and connections. They have enriched the discussions using their experiences to help focus the minds of the participants and help them to get their voices projected in a structured and focused manner.

The VOICES Ambassadors have participated in analysing insights and writing up the recommendations, two further sessions were held with VAs where we had the chance to hear their reflections on the workshops to further build recommendations. A draft report

was also shared with the VOICES Ambassadors who added further comments that have been included in the report.

### Arriving in the UK

Participants reported that the way they were welcomed by the Community Sponsorship groups was deeply appreciated. They are grateful to all their sponsoring groups for the way they had planned and organised everything for their arrival which helped them to feel welcome and supported to integrate. All participants emphasised how supportive, kind and caring their groups are.

Participants spoke of how they were anxious pre-arrival about their journey and settling in a country with a different culture and lifestyle. Participants spoke of their appreciation for their groups acts of kindness and their attention to detail such as ensuring the food they provided was Halal, and for having an interpreter to answer their questions. This has had a great impact on their resettlement and helped families to feel safe and welcome after difficult or traumatic experiences.

### Getting the families settled on their arrival:

*'Most families face similar challenges especially the first family that is sponsored by a new CS group.'*

Participants emphasised how important it is for CS groups to have peer support from other CS groups, to share learning, advice and resources. . Improved peer support networks between groups could save new groups time and could ensure their journey welcoming a family into their community could run more smoothly.

### Housing - Rural and Urban Areas

One of the first challenges that families face is getting the proof of address to open bank accounts and access their rights and entitlements. Many service providers require documentation such as bank statements, utility bills etc which families usually do not have until a few weeks or months post-arrival.

Participants stressed how challenging it can be living in rural areas and felt that living in villages is often more expensive. Public transport is limited which makes it challenging for families to access college, appointments at hospitals and supermarkets.

Participants stressed how challenging it can be for people who have chronic diseases and need to attend regular hospital appointments. Participants have also raised a concern about the difficulties of settling elderly people or those with special needs. They suggested that it is important for the community sponsorship to facilitate the resettlement of families which has a member who needs special care in areas where they can access all services.

Participants spoke of how it is difficult to get a driving license due to the language barrier. They also spoke about the social exclusion associated with settling in remote areas which makes it harder to form bonds with the new community.

*'Resettlement in remote areas is varied from one area to another. Towns could be helpful in terms of access to cheaper accommodation. With all the challenges we encounter, I found it motivating to work harder so I can move to a better situation and help my family to settle in'*

Several participants have raised the issue of accommodation rent contracts. They said moving to a new area from the one they initially settled in could be stressful and frustrating to move from an area where they had settled and built connections and have to start all over again. Moreover, looking for suitable accommodation is another challenge they face, it could take a whole year to find suitable accommodation. They reported that it would be helpful if the Community Sponsorship could extend the contract for more than 2 years. They also suggested that it is important that Community Sponsorship help to convince landlords to extend their contracts.

*'Families are committed to pay the rent on time and the house is being well looked after, why they ask us to look for a new house'.*

*'It is our life now, we build friendships with our community and feel we are part of it, the idea of thinking to moving to a new area could be scary sometimes'.*

## Wellbeing and Social Connections

Young participants noted that integration with their community at school was difficult and challenging.

*'I was shy, confused, hesitant and I wasn't clear about my goals, and I thought I was not going to make through school'.*

*'I felt excluded, I missed few exams at school because of language barrier, it was very difficult in the beginning'.*

*'I had a mild mental health issue, I found it so difficult to move on.'*

Young participants also emphasised how additional support from their schools helped them to adjust and integrate:

*'My community Sponsorship group contacted the school to give me more support. In a few months I started to feel more confident. My school results started to be positive and promising due to the extra support I had at my school and from my group. Within a few months I was speaking a very good level of English, settled at my school and started to help my family with translations'.*

Participants have stated that students who arrive from Arabic countries need more support, and it is so important if we get the support from a student who could be a mentor for this newly arrived student to help him/her in settling smoothly in the community and learning environment.

Participants from the women's group have also highlighted the importance of social gatherings to keep families and young people connected and give them the chance to learn and grow together.

*'Sometimes I feel lonely, I get a great support from the community sponsorship group, but I still feel I need to meet with families from my background, this would be so helpful if we could arrange to meet up'*

Participants who attended a Gathering arranged by the Southwest Network noted that such meetings have a positive impact on the families' wellbeing and learning opportunities. It gave them an opportunity to socialise and meet other families but also helped them build networks and learn about different opportunities.

### Health Care

Many participants have expressed their frustration with the health care system. Many of them have on some occasion experienced delays or cancelation of their appointments because of lack of knowledge of the system and language issues. Others did not know how to book for an appointment because of the language barrier. They appreciate the support they receive from their sponsoring groups in terms of registering with a GP, dentist and other health care services.

Participants emphasised that they would like to know how the health system works in the UK, to help to manage their expectations, help them navigate the health system and become more independent.

*'We need to get used to the health system here in the UK. it is completely different to the system we have in our home countries'. Educate families about the challenges of the system is so important and manage expectation of families.'*

*'A Refugee is part of a wider British community. Community Sponsorship needs to educate families that all challenges they experience are also common amongst the locals. Managing families' expectations is so important to help families move smoothly on settling in the UK'.*

All participants have spoken about the importance of considering Peer education and support model where the newly arriving refugees get supported by other settled families which would be helpful in addressing any challenges they may encounter on their settlement journey.

#### Education and learning the English language:

The language barrier continues to be a big challenge especially for the newly arrived families. Participants have reported that the hours they are given to study the language at college are not sufficient to sufficiently improve their English level. Some participants have suggested that attending the college twice a week and increase the learning hours would be more helpful in improving their level of English.

Some have also spoken about the importance of giving some classes to families before their arrival to give families basic conversation skills and vocabulary they need for communication upon their arrival. Participants from the women's group highlighted the level of confidence they gain when joining the classes at college and in communicating with their classmates. Several participants from the men's group stated that classes at college were not helpful and that they haven't achieved much progress with their English until they started work. Participants also asked if community sponsorship could provide personal classes a few times a week to support families' English learning.

A few women who found it challenging to travel to college asked if colleges could open online courses for them rather than attending face-to-face courses. One of them has started a cooking course and she would like to finish the course and start a business in the future.

*'College needs to be compulsory not optional for families. On some occasions, families don't have the motivation to study at college.'*

*'Eight hours per week at college would be helpful for refugees to settle in the community and reduce the dependence on interpreters. Conversation between refugee and their sponsoring group is so important to discuss their goals and enhance their language.'*

*'Community Sponsorship needs to help families to access online resources for English language. and encourage them to study the language and benefit from these resources. Educating families and raising awareness about the importance of learning English is so important.'*

#### Translation and interpretation:

Participants stressed that interpretation is the most needed service during the first few months of their arrival.

*'It is important to assign an interpreter who would be always there for us answering our questions and help us to understand the system in the UK.'*

A few participants have reported negative experiences with interpreters who weren't there to provide the needed support. They appreciate the work and effort that community sponsorship does in order to make it easier for them to understand things in their own language. They reported that it would be more helpful if each family is supported by an interpreter who speaks the same language of the family, they sponsor for the first 3 months.

*'The interpreter needs to be a kind person who is patient and willing to provide all the support to families.'*

Feedback from VAs about the approach that Community Sponsorship groups use to get an interpreter for families have reported that in some cases the approach is not very helpful. The Community Sponsorship group ask any member who often only speaks a little Arabic to translate. The first few weeks must be processed by an official trained and competent interpreter. They said allocating budget for an interpreter who would spend many hours in the first three months is crucial. It would be more helpful if the interpreter speaks the same Arabic dialect the family speaks as there are many Arabic dialects some may be difficult to understand. For example, the Moroccan dialect is often

difficult for Syrians to understand. The extra time to explain to the families who can't absorb all this information provided on their arrival related to benefits, health care system, schooling and enrolling in college.

Participants spoke about the importance of peer support and the impact of bringing two families together and for the newly arriving family to learn from the experienced one. Booklets that have information in Arabic and English would be beneficial for families. For those who don't speak Arabic or write, the use of voice notes or audio recordings can be helpful.

#### Benefits System and Work Opportunities:

Another challenge that is being raised in terms of financial support is that even with all the support the families receive from their sponsoring groups, they still find it very confusing to understand the system and what benefits they're entitled to. Participants suggested that the CS group could book the family's appointment with the job centre as soon as they arrive to help the family access support as soon as possible and to avoid delays. Participants who took part in these workshops have also appreciated the financial support they receive on their arrival which they said that it helped them so much to adjust in the first few weeks and advised that it is important to keep providing this support in the future even if that support varies from one group to another.

Several participants who are now at the stage of applying for permanent leave to remain have reported the high fees of visa applications that it would be so challenging to secure especially for large families.

#### Work opportunities:

It was promising to find that about 70% of the sample we met this time are working unlike the first sample where only 30% were in employment. Participants highlighted the positive impact of work on enhancing wellbeing, improving their English and supporting them to feel more connected, confident and integrated.

*'I had long experience working in the sector of business management and retail, but I didn't have the confidence because of the language barrier which left me reluctant to look for a job. My community encouraged me to work and now my life has changed in a better way, I am more confident, enhanced my English and better integrated in the community'*

Feedback from VAs, and families that have been in the UK for longer, emphasised the importance of encouraging families to find work and that CS groups could help to inform and educate families about the benefits of work for families.

*'It was confusing for me to understand what I could gain from working if the government provided a monthly financial support for my family'.*

*'The community sponsorship can be themselves confused and can't explain to the family about the benefits of working. They don't have answers about how their financial support will be affected when families need answers on this. On some occasions this increases the fears of working and creates confusion for the family'.*

*'CS needs to explain to the families about the benefits of working and encourage families to work. Otherwise, families will keep relying on benefits rather being productive'.*

Female participants also emphasised how work provides an opportunity to learn and practice English, form social connections and help build up wives and mothers own agency and sense of identity in their communities.

*'It is upsetting that most mothers who settle in the UK don't work. I encourage all mothers to find a job and integrate in the community. The balance is needed. Language will be enhanced, and this will affect and influence her family and her children. Five hours a week would be a good start for mothers with children'. VA*

*'Relying on benefits will increase social challenges between families and increase the chances of separation and divorce. Community Sponsorship needs to educate families on the importance of work and the wellbeing of the social aspect of the family'. VA*

## Training and Volunteering:

All participants reported the positive impact of accessing training and volunteering opportunities.

*'My community encouraged me to get involved with a volunteering opportunity in my community. It had really an impact. In the beginning I was a bit confused and not confident but after engaging with this opportunity, my life has changed in a better way'.*

*Volunteering is a great opportunity for a refugee to integrate in the community. From personal experience, my language has improved from engagement with these opportunities. Engaging with different volunteering opportunities gives you a chance to meet new people, enhance networks and improve your skills. This also helped to amplify the voice of a 'refugee' in my community and enhanced my confidence and integration in the community.'*

Feedback from participants and VOICES Ambassadors highlighted the need to offer tailored volunteering opportunities and a workplace that is inclusive, welcoming and encouraging to refugees. It is important to ask the refugees which sector they would like to volunteer and find something suitable and match their skills. A refugee mentoring organisation, such as [Kimiya](#) may be able to support this.

Participants emphasised the need for CS groups to be trained to give advice and signpost families' areas relevant to settling in the UK, such as benefits, health care, volunteering, work and any other support. This will build the capacity of groups to help prevent delays and issues arising for families in accessing services, rights and entitlements.

VOICES Ambassadors have also suggested a similar training for example on how to deal with newly arriving refugees and educate them about the challenges they face. Similarly, such training would benefit the Home Office and service providers.

### Family Reunion:

Participants reported how confusing family reunion can be and shared their concerns about their families in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Most asked if the CS programme could bring their families to the UK.

*'I have resettled through the community sponsorship in the UK with two of my children in 2018. My third son had to take the sea route to join us but unfortunately, he couldn't make it to the UK. He lives now in Germany, His wellbeing is low, and he keeps asking me to bring him to join us, I would appreciate it if the community sponsorship could help with such cases, I am very worried about my son.'*

Participants' matrix

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Area of the UK</b>
<b>Male</b>	50-59	Syria	Southwest
<b>Male</b>	40-49	Syria	Southwest
<b>Male</b>	50-59	Syria	Southeast
<b>Male</b>	30-39	Syria	Southwest
<b>Male</b>	40-49	Syria	Wales
<b>Male</b>	30-39	Syria	Southeast
<b>Male</b>	40-49	Syria	Southwest
<b>Male</b>	40-49	Syria	Southeast
<b>female</b>	20-29	Syria	Southwest
<b>Female</b>	15-19	Syria	Southeast
<b>Female</b>	40-49	Syria	South
<b>Female</b>	10-19	Syria	South
<b>Female</b>	50-59	Syria	Southeast
<b>Female</b>	30-39	Syria	Southeast
<b>Female</b>	30-39	Syria	Wales
<b>Female</b>	40-49	Syria	Southwest
<b>Female</b>	30-39	Syria	Southwest
<b>Female</b>	30-39	Syria	Southwest
<b>Female</b>	30-39	Syria	Wales
<b>Female</b>	40-49	Syria	Southwest
<b>Female</b>	40-49	Syria	Southwest

<b>Female</b>	30-39	Syria	Wales
---------------	-------	-------	-------

## **Inspiring and life changing story**

**By a VOICES Ambassador**

[ I have always believed that there were no solutions to our problems. We would never become citizens again; we would stay refugees forever, not only my parents and myself, but also my children will be born in a country where they would be considered as refugees not citizens, they would not have a right to study, to work, to hold a nationality or even an ID card. They would have one status: Refugee.

But do we really have to believe politicians when they say, “The refugee crisis is unsolvable”? I don’t think so! The refugee crisis is manageable, not unsolvable, and the UK Community Sponsorship programme has shown this.

My new home, my new community, my new friends and family are all here in the UK. I started to feel that way since I started seeing strangers smile at me on the street and neighbours welcoming me and my family even before they knew where we were from, or what our names were. I started to feel welcome and at ease when the Police Officers on the street looked at me and smiled, which is something that I had never experienced in Syria or Turkey. I feel that way when I see some people working day and night to support us, to make us feel like we are really at home, to protect, advise and care about us.

Being in the UK is one of the greatest things that happened to me. I never thought of leaving Syria despite the war, the violence, and the disappointments. However, my dad got injured and lost his leg during the war. I was only 17 years old, alone, and in a city full of death. That left us with no other choice but to leave.

My search for safety led me to the UK; I didn’t plan that. It was the luck of the draw. The first few months here were difficult. We didn't get any real support from local or national authorities, and none of us spoke English. We were alone again but this time in a safe but cold city. However, we were happy because we are from a small group of the lucky ones who have been chosen for resettlement.

With time, after I enrolled at college for English language classes, things became easier. I started to gain confidence to explore my new environment. Eventually, I started attending my Job Centre appointments without an interpreter finding a job seemed like

slim chance, but I still had hope that I could start a new life in London. My father got an electric wheelchair and became more independent. He could go out on his own to the local park and didn't need me with him all the time. This created a sense of emotional security. I started to feel like my parents needed me less, and so I could think of myself more. I started to think about going back to continue my education and start working.

Three years later, I am working as a retail supervisor, and I volunteer with a Community Sponsorship group, and I am proud that we welcomed our first refugee family to the UK in early 2021. I've also had the amazing opportunity to be an Ambassador for the VOICES Network which helps me to speak up and amplify my voice and the voices of other refugees and people seeking asylum. I am also studying courses in accounting software, business administration, payroll, book-keeping and English. It was a pleasure to be involved in this research as a person with lived experience of the resettlement scheme in the UK and a VOICES Ambassador where I hope that my voice alongside my colleagues will be part of the national change for refugees' issues and change the stereotype around refugees and help to create a more welcoming environment to refugees in British communities that we aim to achieve at VOICES network]