

VOICES Network Community Sponsorship Research

Foreword

By Michael, VOICES Ambassador and Project Coordinator

“Home is the most difficult place to exile”, a refugee once told me these astonishing words as we reflected upon our roles as VOICES Ambassadors in the UK. This profound remark sunk into my mind like how a rain drop falls on dry land. Our new homes can often be frightening and lonely places. It was hard for us to envision local communities coming together to sponsor and support refugees to rebuild their lives in the UK.

A common barrier refugees face to integrating remains linked to how we are perceived. In seeking acceptance after an often-traumatic past is a journey in itself. As is navigating the complexities of everyday life in the UK, including the practicalities of travel, housing, addressing our health concerns, learning a new language and up skilling, retraining or finding work.

Refugees are often in vulnerable situations but we develop fortitude and resilience with our lived experience. Refugees can also thrive with the right support, as this report shows. We are grateful for this project, sponsored by [Reset](#) which unveil refugees’ perspectives on the Community Sponsorship programme in the UK.

As a former asylum seeker in the UK, now an academic, VOICES Ambassador and current British Red Cross employee recruited from the VOICES Network as a Project Coordinator, I have learnt life-long lessons about the value of community and the diverse experiences of integration in the UK.

We have been fortunate to gain a deep understanding of the intricacies of the Community Sponsorship programme, where communities extend generous hearts,

care, and concern towards their fellow human beings who are fleeing persecution.

The power of kindness, which the British Red Cross has extended for over 150 years is now finding its routes and roots within local communities who ease what would otherwise become an extremely difficult process for already traumatised refugees.

How then can this project report be read? In whose lens or vintage point could its recommendations be envisaged from? We hope that this report can bring Reset, the British Red Cross, the VOICES Network, partners across the Community Sponsorship sector together to improve the experience of life in the UK for refugees.

To ensure that the voices of people with lived experience are at the heart of Community Sponsorship, we hope that our recommendations can be taken forward with the care and courage that the Community Sponsorship programme has so brilliantly demonstrated.

This programme is a true beacon of light for humanity in its mission to provide safe and legal routes for refugees to rebuild our lives in the UK. It has been a pleasure conducting this research.

Project Background:

Community Sponsorship (CS) is a vital route through which people who have been recognised as refugees can reach the UK, creating a safe and legal route to reach the UK. Community sponsorship is a Resettlement programme that has local communities at its heart – very literally as financial and immigration sponsors for people with refugee status. This facilitates a unique way in which local community groups and refugees can directly learn from each other, share, grow, and connect- having a unique and powerful impact on integration.

This report is the outcome of a three month research project delivered by VOICES Network and the British Red Cross which engaged from refugees who have settled in the UK through the Community Sponsorship Programme. The participatory research explored two questions with participants:

1. What would you want the Community Sponsorship Council/Reset to know about your experience of being welcomed through Community Sponsorship and of being a refugee in the UK?
2. How would you like activities like this (that bring you together with other refugees and ask for your perspective) to look like in the future?

Our Approach

This project was led by three British Red Cross staff members with lived experience of migration and displacement, two of whom are also members of the VOICES Network and refugees themselves. A Peer Research approach can enhance the richness of insight and participants are likely to respond more honestly and openly, resulting in higher quality data with more depth and nuance.¹

Participants were invited to join the workshops through their Community Sponsorship groups. An email in both English and Arabic, alongside an Arabic voice recording of was sent to Reset to be circulated through sponsoring groups to potential participants. A second Kurdish email was sent to encourage better representation. The workshops were also advertised through VOICES Network twitter platform as well as Reset social media platforms using a poster in both English and Arabic.

Participants asked if the workshops could be facilitated in Arabic by the research team rather than through an interpreter. It was noted that this enabled participants to express themselves more freely, without pausing for interpretation and felt more able to convey their insights to the research team.

To encourage participation, three fictional characters were designed by the project team and the British Red Cross Co-Production team, using fictional scenarios that were reflective of reality. These were shared with the participants to help depersonalised the discussion and create a safe space for participants to reflect on their own experiences.

¹ <https://communityengagementhub.org/resource/peer-research-glasgow/>

British Red Cross definition of Co-production

Co-production is a values-driven approach and way of working where **power is shared between people working within organisations and people with lived experience** as they work collaboratively to shape and deliver services and activities. This partnership approach recognises the **value of shared insights and experiences** that help shape services and improve the quality of outcomes for people who access services.

Co-production is an approach, style and way of working. The VOICES Network encourages partners across the sector to consider what projects and priorities you already have and how you can approach these in a participatory way that **shares power with people with lived experience**.

Co-production is **distinct from consultation, feedback and engagement**, in that it takes a **partnership approach** and supports people with relevant lived experience to **influence decision-making**.²

Consultation	Co-production
Seeking views or extracting personal experience	Power-sharing, being transparent about what can be influenced, and which elements are already fixed
Decisions mostly made by staff	Influencing decision-making. Not just sharing experiences but shaping solutions, strategies and activities
One direction flow of information	A two-way conversation as equal partners. A more 'active' participation
Limited or unknown influence	Outcomes and feedback are given to participants

² <https://communityengagementhub.org/what-we-do/co-production-and-participation/>

A 'one-off' engagement	An ongoing role for participants. Insights and the relationship can be built on over time
No/limited feedback or follow up	An opportunity for participants benefits e.g. skills development and training

Methodology

This research was conducted using a participatory approach and the findings are based on insights gathered during three stages of fieldwork carried out in January and February 2021:

- One men's group workshop conducted over zoom with nine male participants from both urban and rural areas.
- One women's group workshop conducted over zoom with four female participants from both urban and rural areas.
- Four one-to-one interviews conducted over telephone with one male and three female participants who were unable to attend the workshops.

Of the 17 participants, most indicated that they had arrived in the UK in 2019. Participants were Resettled in a range of urban and rural locations as shown below:

Gender	Age group	Country of origin	Area of the UK
Male	31-40	Syria	South East
Male	41-50	Syria	London area
Male	41-50	Syria	South East
Male	21-30	Syria	East England
Male	31-40	Syria	South West
Male	31-40	Iraq	London area
Male	41-50	Syria	Wales
Male	31-40	Syria	Wales
Male	41-50	Syria	South West
Female	41-50	Syria	London area
Female	41-50	Iraq	North West
Female	41-50	Syria	South West
Female	41-50	Syria	South West
Female	21-30	Syria	East England
Female	21-30	Syria	South East
Female	21-30	Syria	South West
Female	31-40	Syria	South West

Limitations of this approach

Drawing on the British Red Cross' co-production experience with [the VOICES Network](#) and Covid-19 [Lived Experience Advisory Group \(LEAG\)](#), we recommend a **minimum period of 5-6 months to co-produce** a proposal, research or funding bid with people with lived experience (dependent on the scale of the ask). This would enable participants to understand the project and its objectives, make an informed decision about their participation, build trusting relationships with project staff, engage with the information and participate in discussions and decision-making processes with confidence.

The three-month timeline for this piece of research is somewhat at odds with our recommendation which led to the engagement being at times more consultative than co-produced. If time allowed, there would have been more scope to reach a larger and more diverse pool of participants, and opportunities for them to shape

recommendations in a genuinely co-produced way.

Difficulties reaching participants through email did not secure as many responses as the team had hoped. This led to the workshops being postponed to allow time to focus on recruiting more participants. A second email was sent with a Kurdish translation. The Participation Officer also reached out to Community Sponsorship groups by telephone.

Following the low number of participants, a more informal approach that tapped into existing social connections was taken. Participants reached out to people they knew who had also arrived through Community Sponsorship. We also worked with BRC colleagues with personal connections to Community Sponsorship groups to advertise the workshops to potential participants. This word-of-mouth method more than doubled the numbers of participants culminating in ten men and eight women expressing their interest and willingness to participate.

Staff capacity: Having one Participation Officer working 2.5 days per week and both Project Co-ordinators working one day per week presented challenges in coordinating the workload, planning and analysing insights.

Covid-19 restrictions: Working remotely and conducting interviews and workshops over zoom and telephone made it more difficult to build rapport with participants and gauge their facial expressions and body language. IT literacy also impacted participation and the staff team had to phone each participant the day before the scheduled session to guide them through accessing zoom.

Home schooling and childcare: This issue has disproportionately impacted women's engagement in the project leading to fewer being able to attend the workshop. To mitigate this, the Participation Officer offered one-to-one telephone interviews to encourage their engagement. Comparatively, 7 of the 10 male participants were not working and appeared to have more free time, whereas the female participants were largely responsible for childcare and home-schooling.

A lack of diversity: Most participants were aged 40-50 and were parents. Reaching

young people and older people such as grandparents was difficult within the timeframe and restrictions.

Key insights

- **Arriving in the UK:** Lack of accessible induction information on or before arrival in the families' languages.
- **Housing – Rural and Urban Areas:** Feelings of loneliness and isolation particularly in rural areas.
- **Wellbeing and Social Connections:** Participants noted limited social connections with the wider community, particularly with people from similar backgrounds.
- **Health Care:** Participants explained feeling frustrated by a lack of clarity and information on the health care system and their rights.
- **Language:** Language barriers continue to be the most challenging element for most families and has a significant impact on their lives.
- **Translation and interpretation:** The initial period of translation service provision may not be as long as participants feel is needed.
- **Education:** College classes are not sufficient for learning the language.
- **The Welfare system:** Lack of understanding of the welfare system, particularly around universal credit, housing benefits and council tax as well as finding employment.
- **Work, Training and Volunteering Opportunities:** Participants noted a lack of volunteering, training and placement opportunities and advice with limited job opportunities.
- **Family Reunion:** Participants asked for more guidance and information on family reunion applications.



Above: World cloud with the most common words participants shared in the sessions.

Arriving in the UK

It is difficult to express the deep level of gratitude that participants shared about the support they have received from their CS groups, their new communities and the sector more generally. However, this report draws out key findings and recommendations on how this life-changing programme of refugee Resettlement can be improved.

Participants noted a lack of information leading to delays around access to health care, school registration and college classes. This caused challenges described as ‘exhausting’ by some participants.

Participants suggested that CS schemes could offer an induction course or workshop upon arrival to inform participants about key aspects of integration such as school, college and higher education, health care, housing, employment and welfare.

Housing - Rural and Urban Areas

Participants were positive about being provided with secure housing from day one of their arrival to the UK.

“It is very challenging the issue of having a car, we usually use the bus. It takes many hours to go do shopping and more long hours to come back. It will be more complicated if I had an emergency at night-time.”

Male 41-50, Resettled in South West.

However, those who settled in rural villages noted ongoing challenges related to their remote location. For example, participants said that it takes them a long time to reach international food stores which are often located in

larger towns or cities. These participants advised that the public transport system in villages is not often frequent meaning shopping often takes an entire day.

Participants asked the research team to suggest the possibility of settling families in cities rather than villages to ensure better access to a broader range of facilities and services which could reduce isolation and resolve some other issues participants raised.

Wellbeing and Social Connections

“I never forgot the support I have received from the Community Sponsorship Group when I was hospitalised for more than a week. They looked after me and my kids and been always there for me.”

Female 21-30, Resettled in East of England.

All participants expressed a deep appreciation for the support and encouragement they continue to receive from their sponsoring groups.

Many participants explained that having a family peer support from the same culture going through the same journey could reduce the impact of culture shock significantly boosting their wellbeing. Parents also noted that nurturing connections between their children with others from refugee backgrounds or similar communities would be beneficial for their own children’s socialisation and development.

Another suggestion participants put forward was, to Resettle families in areas where other refugee families belonging to their own community or background are located. CS groups could consider settling at least two families in the same area. This suggestion may perhaps present significant challenges to groups' capacity, hence a less-resource intensive option could be opted to ensure Resettled families connect both remotely and in person.

Participants noted that having families who have been through the same experience and from the same cultural background is helpful for their moving forward in their new journey. For example, in Scotland there is an annual New Scots Gathering for all Resettled refugees which provides an opportunity to informally come

"It would be great if I could meet other families who share the same experiences. My children will love to meet new friends from the same culture."

Female 21-30, Resettled in South West.

together and build social connections. They also suggested that, where possible, the Community Sponsorship scheme could connect newly arrived families with families who had arrived before them to build up affiliative social connections that would promote their better understanding of the new UK environment and its potential challenges.

Emotional Support

Some women reported that they feel unable to open up to therapists using interpreters. Generally, women feeling that they do not have anyone to trust and form strong bonds with, attested to their incapacity to find someone to confide, despite of course, their gratitude for the support they get from their sponsoring group.

From our experience, we believe that the women could benefit from communicating in Arabic and particularly with women who understand their culture. This particularly emphasizes the significance of language and their affiliative culture in helping refugees settle in.

Health Care

Participants reported that they found it difficult to understand the health system, particularly during their first year in the UK. Most participants did not fully understand the role of a GP. Specifically, the difference between primary and secondary healthcare in the UK in perspective to what patients could access and the process how they get to be referred.

Language barriers present additional impediments in accessing healthcare. One participant spoke about missing GP appointments mainly due to misunderstandings he encountered. When he finally attended the appointment, he was unable to understand what the doctor was telling him since they were unable to secure an interpreter.

To inform participants about their rights to healthcare, community sponsorship groups could share accessible translated information with participants from organisations such as Doctors of the World which translate public health resources.³

Language

Participants noted that whenever they come across a challenge or problem, they contact their sponsor group and directly receive support and guidance. However, many noted that language barriers have continued to exist for years.

Some also said that they feel a bit behind because of the language barrier. Participants said that the sponsoring groups are very helpful with their children's school homework. However, due to the current COVID-19 pandemic their remote learning and study has been very challenging, leaving their children unable to keep up with schooling.

I wish I could obtain a driving licence. This will make my life much easier. The language is a huge barrier. Sometimes I feel as I had been left behind.

Female 41-50, Resettled in North West.

Most participants described feeling unable to get a driving licence due to language barriers. Participants who had a provisional license were unable to pass their theory test and therefore unable progress with their practical driving test. This was more evident in

participants settled in rural areas. They stressed the need to have their driving license

³ <https://www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk/translated-health-information/>

suggesting an option to take the theory test in their first language, which would better support them.

Translation and interpretation

Participants expressed their gratitude for having constant interpretation support for the first 20 days. However, many indicated that after this initial period, they had not developed sufficient English language skills and asked if interpreters could continue assisting them for an extended

"I am so grateful for all the help I have received from the Community Sponsorship. We are sharing meals and good times and they are my family here."

Female 41-50, Resettled in London.

period as they develop their confidence in the first few months. Their effective ability to decipher meanings from important written documentation as well as convey accurate meanings of their spoken English would accelerate as a result.

Education

Most participants reported attending college. Some said the large group sessions are not mostly useful and asked for more 1:1 regular support in terms of teaching. Participants also asked if there could be an apprenticeship programme that covers their most pressing needs at least 3 times a week to help them to better adjust to life in the UK. This would enable them truly feel settled accelerating their focus on education.

The Welfare System

Seven male participants advised that they are not yet in work and are relying on government support. Some still struggle to understand which benefits they are entitled to. Other participants described their CS groups as being extremely

Finding work has never been easy for me. I asked the community sponsorship group about what I need to do in order to run a business. It has been challenging. Finally, I have my business and I am officially a self employed.

Male 21-30, Resettled in East of England

supportive, although they do not always readily have the information or the experience to navigate the welfare system of Local Councils. Therefore, a service providing this information to CS groups and participants would be beneficial.

Work, Training and Volunteering Opportunities

To enable a more efficient integration, some participants proposed that the Community Sponsorship scheme could coordinate apprenticeship and work experience placements with local employers either on voluntary basis or paid employment basis.

Participants noted that work experience opportunities would significantly support their greater wellbeing, confidence, language, integration, self-realisation as participating members within the community. They also suggested that opportunities to participate in training courses about life in the UK, could be run concurrently with their work-related training. This could greatly enhance their skills, knowledge and confidence to secure employment.

Work placement or volunteering opportunities could be more useful for me. It is been two years since I have started college and my English level has not been yet improved.

Male 41-50, Resettled in South West.

One participant, nonetheless, is self-employed. He faced various challenges in understanding the process of registering as self-employed and starting a new business. His sponsoring group did their best to help him based on what they know, but he had to look for more information by himself. He met a person by chance who introduced him to a company that provides this service. Other participants suggested, if possible, that the community sponsorship programme assist them link to specific services that offer support and advice on employment and welfare support.

Family Reunion

One of the biggest difficulties I face is family reunion. We are Resettled here, our families we left behind, of course, they live in very difficult circumstances.

Male 41-50, Resettled in South West.

A number of participants said that since arriving in the UK, they have tried to apply for family reunification. They said this caused them a lot of distress and worry about their families they left

behind. Participants shared their experiences about settlement, having been subject to 5 years ban for visiting families they left behind in refugee camps in Turkey and Jordan. These participants advised that any help in supporting family

reunion applications would be much appreciated since it would enable them to truly integrate and rebuild their lives in the UK.

Recommendations

a) Recommendations on improving Community Sponsorship

Arriving in the UK:

- Provide **accessible induction information** on or before arrival, in the families' first language.
 - Participants put forward the recommendation of a **life skills programme** with an induction course for new arrivals to introduce them to life in the UK. Such an induction course could benefit much from the participation of an existing refugee who can share their lived experiences and offer guidance for the new arrivals.
 - Consider introducing a **mentor system** where a new arrival could be allocated an existing member of the community, particularly from within the refugee community or from a similar culture or background experience to provide an element of peer support.

Housing – Rural and Urban Areas

- Participants recommended where possible, settle families near other refugee families. Where this is not possible, create opportunities for **families to build social connections**.

Wellbeing and Social Connections

- Linked to the isolation noted above, create opportunities for families to come by, for example, **organising an annual gathering** for all families who have been. This could help families to connect, share experiences, learn from each other and enhance their wellbeing.
- **Social activities for women to connect**, many spoke about feeling isolated at home.
- **Psychosocial support/counselling** with professionals from similar backgrounds.

Health Care:

- Provide or share **accessible translated information** on the health care system, services and rights, including the **right to interpretation**.

Education and Language:

- Consider how **English language learning** resources could be improved. Many participants noted that they continue to find language the most challenging barrier that prevents them from fully integrating in their new community.
- Participants expressed a desire for more **one-to-one language teaching** but know that this is not always possible.

The Welfare System

- Ensure groups and families can access **advice and support on the welfare system**.

Work, Training and Volunteering Opportunities

- Provide or link Resettled families to **employability support** where they can access advice and guidance on employment, volunteering, work experience and training opportunities.
- This programme could also include support with obtaining a British Driving Licence as most participants noted the importance of having a car to manage their daily needs especially for those who are settled in remote villages.

Family Reunion

- Provide or refer refugees to **advice on family reunion** criteria and applications, whilst being clear about who has the decision-making power.

b) Recommendations on increasing refugee participation

- Participants should be provided with **opportunities to amplify their voices**, such as routes to join the VOICES Network and other refugee-led groups. Several participants expressed interest in becoming VOICES Ambassadors, but the current team do not have capacity to expand to these areas.
 - Linked to issues raised by participants, such as loneliness and isolation, confidence, language and skills development, a VOICES-type project for Community Sponsorship participants could **build social connections, confidence and skills**.

- **A Participation Officer** should be recruited to ensure that participants are fully trained and supported to meaningfully engage in opportunities. This can ensure an ongoing relationship, moving towards genuine co-production and avoiding a ‘one off’ consultative approach to activities.
 - This dedicated resource could create space for people with lived experience of Community Sponsorship to influence policy, practice and public perceptions. The ability to **build trusting relationships** and invest time in reaching and supporting participants could **mitigate the communication and recruitment challenges** that this project faced.

- Families expressed a real desire to **communicate in their first language** with project staff. Having two team members who shared their language and culture helped participants to open up and express themselves more freely.

- Any future work should adopt **a one-to-one approach**, which was not always possible during this short-term piece of work. One-to-one conversations were useful in briefing and debriefing participants before and after group sessions. This was also productive when engaging with women due to some sensitive issues that they may feel unable to

discuss in public but happy to discuss with another woman on 1-to-1 basis.

Case Studies:

Mo (pseudonym) – arrived in the UK in 2019.

“Since I have arrived to the UK, I have received a huge support from the Community Sponsorship Programme. As a father who fled the war in Syria, I have encountered many challenges in the beginning following my arrival to the UK, one of which was the language barrier. The services and support I have received from the Community Sponsorship Programme have changed my life. The programme and my sponsoring group have always been there for me and my family.

They helped me access a language course and get a volunteering opportunity at the museum in the city where I have Resettled. This opportunity has resulted in being offered a paid job. Since then, I started to feel more confident in moving onto my Resettlement journey in the UK. The Community Sponsorship Programme has been there for us as a genuine family addressing all our concerns and alleviating all our fears and worries.

In order to give back to the community that embraced me and my family, I, along with another Syrian refugee, have established a charity in my community which aims to provide aid to vulnerable individuals and the homeless. One way to feel integrated in the community is to be able to positively impact others' lives in your new community. The charity delivers food and essentials to different communities in my town; our beneficiaries are culturally diverse and have different backgrounds.

I am very glad about how much our work has impacted the lives of needy people and especially since the beginning of the COVID-19 health crisis. I am now excited about starting a new course at university next year. I am grateful for all the support I have received from the Community Sponsorship Programme and for the patience and time they have dedicated for me and my family”.

Sarah (pseudonym) Settled in the UK in 2018.

“The Community Sponsorship Programme has been a saviour for me and my family. I have been Resettled in a small town in the UK. Life was very challenging, away from

all my social life that I used to have. The new culture, the language, all seemed to be barriers that I have never thought I would overcome. The support and kindness I and my family have received was immense. Getting my first steps through English courses had been so powerful for me.

The unlimited opportunities that was given to me by the Community Sponsorship Programme has increased my confidence and helped me to integrate in the wider community. Since we arrived to the UK in 2018, I have finished my English course, obtained a driving licence, led many community activities, and I am proud to say, I am now a strong and independent mother, wife and a fully integrated member of my new community.

I am now a volunteer with a community group in my town to help other families to Resettle and build new lives away from conflicts in our home country and elsewhere. Since I have engaged with the Community Sponsorship Programme, I am glad to see the impact of our work that has resulted in helping the first family to Resettle in the UK in 2019 and we are now preparing to welcome three more families in a few months' time.

Being involved in this work has had a significant impact on me. I owe all this achievement and success to my Community Sponsorship group who have always been there for me, for my husband and for my children. We now have a very strong bond. I have been rewarded with a great social life and a kind and caring community in my new refuge town. I never felt that I was left behind. I look forward to maintaining what I have achieved in the last three years, increase my contribution and be a productive citizen in the community that opened a door of hope for me and my family. Thanks to all the love, support and kindness we received from the Community Sponsorship Programme”.