

Reflections after 2 years

15 Community Sponsorship groups tell us about their highs and lows as they reach the end of their two year Community Sponsorship journey

In 2021, we spoke to 15 Community Sponsorship groups who welcomed refugee families between November 2017 and June 2019. We asked them to look back and reflect on how things had gone, what they'd learnt, and how we at Reset could adapt our support for future Community Sponsorship groups.

Roughly half of the Community Sponsorship groups we spoke to were made up of people coming together for the first time, while the other half were centred around an existing organisation – most often a faith group. The groups were evenly split between urban and rural or semi-rural locations.

Every Community Sponsorship group we spoke to experienced high points and low points. But groups also told us that the highs outweighed the lows. They saw Community Sponsorship as having been a valuable way to bring their communities together and support families in need.

Our findings

Engaging the community before the family arrives can lead to better integration outcomes

Community Sponsorship groups that engaged their communities in their work prior to the family's arrival reported greater integration of the family into the local area, including higher rates of employment at the end of the 2 year period. Rural groups appear to have been more proactive in reaching out to their community as early as possible than urban groups.

Planning for the 2 year mark as early as possible enables a smoother transition to independence

Community Sponsorship groups recommended planning with the family as early as possible how the group's support will change over the 2 year period, and what independence could look like. Groups found it important to share with the family the timeframe around their support and to ensure that the family realised that the Community Sponsorship group would not exist as a formal group forever. This ensured that families did not feel abandoned as the groups reduced their support, but instead saw this as a positive indication of their own progression towards independence.

The Covid-19 lockdowns affected progress towards independence

Community Sponsorship groups that welcomed families closer to the implementation of the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020 reported maintaining a high level of support for longer than other Community Sponsorship groups. Where families had longer to settle in before the first lockdown was introduced, groups generally found that they reduced the intensity of their support after the first 6 months.

Where support is still needed after 2 years, it tends to be for discrete tasks

Community Sponsorship groups reported that as they got closer to the 2 year mark, the majority of support given was to do with helping the family understand the official letters that arrived, using online services and managing medical appointments.

Ensuring that families understand their housing options at the end of the 2 year period is essential and requires frequent communication between volunteers and family members

Groups found that it was essential to speak to families early on about their housing options at the end of the 2 year period. This was particularly important where the group had secured discounted rent for the family, or subsidised the rent themselves, and could not guarantee that these discounts or subsidies would continue beyond 2 years. Groups told us that it was important to have this conversation multiple times to ensure the family understood their options, and to make sure that family members and volunteers were always on the same page. Where families had children during the 2 year period and outgrew the property, there was a particular challenge to find larger properties in the same area that would still be affordable.

Community Sponsorship groups function best when they invest time and energy in supporting their group members

Volunteers told us that many of them had struggled with managing the internal dynamics of their Community Sponsorship groups. Managing volunteers is a particular skill and groups felt it would be helpful to spend more time thinking about this early on in the planning process.

Community Sponsorship groups must be prepared and equipped to adapt their English language strategies to meet the needs of the individuals they are supporting

Multiple groups found that they were supporting people to learn English who had little to no experience of formal education. It was important for groups to adapt their strategies so that they worked for the individuals learning English, rather than sticking rigidly to a pre-designed plan. Where groups were supporting an individual who was illiterate in their first language, they often found it useful to understand the cause of an individual's illiteracy so that they could adapt their support appropriately. For example, understanding whether an individual cannot read or write due to a learning disability, or whether they just simply

never had the opportunity to learn due to their displacement, is crucial to providing effective support.

It is important for volunteers to manage expectations around employment – for themselves and for family members

Community Sponsorship groups sometimes found that they had overestimated how easily family members might be able to find employment. They felt it was important to be realistic about the barriers that refugees can face to accessing employment – particularly those with a low level of English language competency. They also felt that it was important to share this with the family members in order to manage expectations and avoid setting unachievable goals. This was particularly true for those family members who aim to re-enter professions requiring specific qualifications in the UK.

Community Sponsorship is challenging but highly rewarding and impactful

60% of the groups we spoke to were considering or already progressing applications to welcome more refugees through Community Sponsorship.

At Reset, we are constantly adapting our training and support in response to feedback from volunteers and resettled refugees. Please check our [Training Website](#) to see our latest resources and our upcoming training sessions – all free for Community Sponsorship groups.