



# Building belonging: Strengthening CS for refugee integration in the UK

This policy brief presents findings from the research “The Importance of Social Networks amongst Refugees Resettled through the Community Sponsorship Scheme and the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme”, conducted at the University of Birmingham (2020–2024). The study explored the role of social networks in refugee integration under two key UK programmes: the Community Sponsorship Scheme (CS) and the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), which has since been replaced by the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS).

Using a comparative mixed-methods design, the research drew on in-depth interviews with 23 refugees—10 resettled through CS and 13 through VPRS. Employing social network analysis and the Indicators of Integration Framework, the study examined how different types of social relationships and the resources exchanged through them shape refugees’ integration processes in the UK. It revealed significant differences between the social networks developed under the two schemes, offering critical insights into how programme design and support structures influence social connection, emotional wellbeing, and access to opportunities for resettled refugees.

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## Key Comparative Findings

- **Broader social networks in Community Sponsorship:** CS refugees developed wider, more diverse and supportive networks, thanks to their close relationships with volunteer sponsors. These networks offered tailored emotional and practical support, enhancing refugees’ sense of belonging, confidence, and reciprocity.
- **Structured but limited networks in VPRS:** Refugees supported by local authorities and caseworkers under VPRS received reliable formal assistance, particularly during their initial resettlement phase, but their social networks were smaller and less diverse, often confined to professional relationships.
- **Emotional versus structural outcomes:** Although CS participants reported stronger social and emotional connections, these did not always translate into better outcomes in employment, housing, or language acquisition. Social networks alone could not overcome systemic barriers such as limited ESOL provision, housing insecurity, or restricted labour market access.
- **The quality of relationships matters:** Caring, trust-based, and reciprocal relationships, rather than a high number of connections, were the most significant factors facilitating successful integration.
- **Integration as a shared, multi-directional process:** Effective integration requires the collaboration of multiple stakeholders—refugees, volunteers, local authorities, civil society, and government—working together to address both relational and structural needs.

## Purpose of this Policy Brief

This brief provides evidence-based recommendations to strengthen CS in the UK. It is intended for policymakers in the Home Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG), as well as for local authorities, third-sector organisations, and volunteer groups involved in sponsorship and integration support. Drawing on comparative research findings, it highlights opportunities to enhance training, coordination, and sustainability across sponsorship initiatives, and to inform global best practices for community-led refugee resettlement. Although the scale of CS remains limited, continued investment offers strong value for money. By mobilising community capacity, the scheme reduces pressure on local services, and modest, well-targeted funding helps sustain these social and economic benefits.

CS has demonstrated significant potential to support refugees' integration by fostering local social networks, emotional wellbeing, and community cohesion. Findings show that sponsorship facilitates trust, belonging, and empowerment, but that effectiveness varies depending on the preparedness and support of volunteer groups, regional disparities, and the sustainability of funding.

## Key Findings

- Sponsored refugees developed **broader and more diverse networks**, encompassing volunteers, neighbours, and community organisations.
- Emotional and practical support from volunteers **enhanced confidence and wellbeing**, fostering mutual understanding and reciprocity.
- Some sponsorship groups faced **power imbalances and paternalism** when lacking adequate training or cultural awareness.
- Integration outcomes depended heavily on the **volunteers' diversity, resources, and skills**, with inconsistent support across regions.
- Without continued government investment, the sustainability and scalability of CS are at risk.

## Contact

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## Policy Recommendations

1. **Expand and Sustain Community Sponsorship**
  - Ensure that CS remains additional to national resettlement quotas (UKRS), not a substitute for government-led commitments.
  - Provide multi-year core funding to local and national coordination bodies to enable consistent training and support.
2. **Professionalise and Support Volunteer Groups**
  - Develop standardised, accredited training for sponsors on trauma-informed practice, safeguarding, and intercultural communication.
  - Establish regional mentoring networks where experienced CS groups mentor new or emerging ones.
  - Offer small grants or stipends to reduce financial burdens and ensure equitable participation across socioeconomic contexts.
3. **Strengthen Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning**
  - Create a national database and longitudinal evaluation system to track integration outcomes and inform evidence-based policy.
  - Involve refugees in co-designing monitoring frameworks, ensuring their perspectives shape improvements.
4. **Promote Social Diversity and Mutual Integration**
  - Encourage CS groups to include members from diverse social, faith, and ethnic backgrounds to model inclusive communities.
  - Incentivise partnerships with schools, employers, and cultural institutions to expand refugees' engagement with wider society.
5. **Position the UK as a Global Leader**
  - Share lessons internationally through the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI) and similar networks.
  - Promote CS as a model of shared responsibility and community-driven inclusion globally.

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