

Two years ago there was scepticism that volunteers could provide effective support to Syrian refugees coming to Britain. Nadine Daniel, the Church of England's National Refugee Welcome Coordinator, writes about how the Community Sponsorship Scheme is now helping to transform the lives of refugees and host communities across the country from remote rural areas to the inner cities.

What is Community Sponsorship and why has the Church of England become so involved in its implementation? The idea is simple; in welcoming a stranger and their family a local community guide and support the resettled family through such things as school admissions, learning English, registering with a GP, negotiating benefit applications and enabling the adults back into work. The community will find and prepare a home for the family. Above all the community will provide a welcome and friendship. Vulnerable families externally displaced by the Syrian conflict are identified by the UN Refugee Agency as suitable for resettlement. After stringent assessment and health checks, suitable families are submitted to the Home Office for further security vetting and are then matched to an area for resettlement. They are either placed with a local authority under the VPRS (Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme) or if a group is offering to help resettle, with a Community Sponsorship Scheme.

Forty years after the first family of Vietnamese Boat People were resettled by a community in Canada, more than 300,000 people have started life there supported and befriended by local communities; many of them very remote. Does it work? Well many of those resettled by community sponsorship have become sponsors themselves. The Minister for Immigration, Ahmed Hussen, is himself a beneficiary of Community Sponsorship, having arrived from an UN Refugee Agency camp in Kenya after his family fled the war in Somalia.

Here in the UK, Community Sponsorship started slowly. Many local authorities were sceptical that volunteers could provide effective support, fearing that their overstretched staff would be left to pick up the pieces when schemes failed. To date none has and many local authorities are now enthusiastic supporters of the scheme, working with the community groups to achieve often remarkable results. The Church of England, having committed its support to the idea of Community Sponsorship, continues to work with other denominations and faith based organisations from national level to individual parishes. Where possible the guiding principle has been to integrate the host community first by encouraging as many organisations as possible to become involved. To date most of the schemes have either been led or significantly supported by FBOs, with the Church of England involved in almost all. Having a presence in every community has greatly helped. Recently the Mothers Union in the Diocese of Manchester became the first MU to lead a scheme, welcoming an extended family of eight to the diocese. In Chelmsford, the diocese has committed to supporting a Community Resettlement Scheme in every Archdeaconry. Housing and financial support together with technical support and training for groups will all be provided by the diocese. Housing is a significant issue, especially in the South East, and it is hoped that where Chelmsford has led, other dioceses will follow.

The astonishing fact of Community Sponsorship is that it works in any community, large or small, urban or rural. Recent figures published by the Home Office show that the region with the highest number of schemes is the rural South West. A family resettled in Ottery St Mary decided to call their baby daughter Mary in recognition of the friendship and support they have received from the community. The last two years have shown that an increasing number of communities are getting involved. In so doing they have discovered that helping to transform the lives of a resettled family, they have transformed their community for the better in the process, with greater communication, cohesion, and integration.



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