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You Are Safe Here: Community Sponsorship Policy and Refugee Integration in the UK

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Abstract

Globally, resettlement is considered one of the most durable solutions for refugees. The UK has introduced a Community Sponsorship Scheme that enables communities to resettle refugee families providing them with enhanced integration support aided by volunteers. This paper investigates the nature of integration support that sponsored refugees receive utilising the analytical framework of UK's Indicators of Integration (IoI). Data was collected from interviews with refugee adults resettled in diverse and less diverse areas. Our findings illustrate the importance of support given by volunteer groups to enable access to resources and connections. We establish that there is much potential for sponsorship programmes to add value to refugee support suggesting that the current expansion of sponsorship from its Canadian roots may help facilitate refugee integration. However, further research is needed to uncover the long-term experiences of sponsored refugees and to compare their outcomes to those of forced migrants arriving via different mechanisms.

Keywords: Community sponsorship; indicators of integration; refugee integration; social connections; cultural exchanges

Introduction

In 2022, the number of forcibly displaced people exceeded 100 million, of whom twenty seven point one million were refugees (European Commission, 2022). Alongside voluntary return and local integration, refugee resettlement is one of UNHCR's (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) three durable solutions for refugees, yet less than 1 per cent of those needing assistance are resettled annually (UNHCR, 2022). In the last ten years, while the UK's government has implemented an increasingly hostile asylum system, it has also diversified its resettlement offer, introducing the Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS). CSS was introduced to enable communities to volunteer to resettle refugee families and provide them with enhanced integration support (Home Office, 2016).

The Global Refugee Resettlement Initiative (GRSI) promotes community-based sponsorship models with the argument that the social support provided by sponsors to refugees can lead to positive integration outcomes and increase the number of refugees resettled (GRSI, 2022). Following the introduction of the UK's CSS, several other countries have followed suit (Fratzke *et al.*, 2019). With most studies focusing on the Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSR), which was been operating for more than forty years, there is limited knowledge about how sponsorship groups elsewhere support refugee integration. This knowledge gap is particularly significant given the substantial differences between the Canadian PSR and

sponsorship programmes developed in Europe (ICMC Europe, 2017). Using data collected in interviews with refugee adults resettled through CSS, this article responds to the question of what kind of integration support CSS volunteers offer to UK-sponsored refugees. Using the UK's Indicators of Integration (IoI) (Ndofor-Tah *et al.*, 2019) as an analytical framework, we ask what kinds of assistance were provided to sponsored refugees and what types of support were lacking. The article proceeds as follows. After describing the UK's CSS, we outline the key features of the IoI framework and how CSS volunteers can potentially aid refugee integration. We then set out the methods used to collect data before delineating our findings using the IoI to frame our results. We conclude that the support available to refugees varies by group and resettlement location. The care and concern provided by volunteers can help facilitate a sense of belonging and connection, but volunteers' lack of experience in working with refugees means they are unable to deal with complex challenges or structural barriers.

Community sponsorship in the UK

From 2015 to 2022, the UK granted protection to 147,048 people, of whom 49,194 were resettled (Home Office, 2023). Since 2015, the number of refugees resettled in the UK has increased with the introduction of local authority-led programmes, including the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) and the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS), for supporting people displaced by the Syrian conflict (Home Office, 2023). The annual total number of refugees resettled depends on local authorities' openness to resettlement and Government agreement (Home Office, 2021). In 2016, the UK Government further introduced the CSS in response to demands from civil society to do more to support Syrian refugees (Home Office, 2016). Since then, almost 1000 refugees have been resettled under CSS (Reyes-Soto, 2023), including individuals under VPRS and the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS). In 2020, the number of sponsored refugees became additional to the government's resettlement commitment (Wilkins, 2020). Another sponsorship model, Homes for Ukraine (H4U), was also introduced in 2022, allowing individuals to sponsor and support displaced Ukrainians in the UK. However, unlike CSS, H4U sponsors can select the people they host and are expected to house them within their homes in exchange for a monthly payment. Under CSS, sponsoring groups must complete a detailed application form, raise at least £9000, and provide sponsored refugees with independent accommodation for two years. They cannot select or name the refugees they sponsor, and thus all those supported under CSS are strangers. Local authorities and police must approve CSS applications, indicating safeguarding concerns have been addressed. The Home Office reviews all documents and grants approval; with the process often taking several months (Hassan and Phillimore, 2020). After arrival, volunteers must help refugees to settle for a minimum of a year (Phillimore *et al.*, 2020).

CSS refugees are selected by UNHCR according to vulnerability criteria and referred to the Home Office for security checks. Once clearance is agreed, families are matched with a group. Refugees do not choose resettlement locations, although since 2018, attempts have been made to match rural families with rural areas. Before departure, refugees attend a short orientation programme about life in the UK and have no contact with sponsors. The sponsoring group then meets refugees at the airport. Under both CSS and H4U, sponsors are required to assist newcomers after arrival, including with enrolment in English classes, access to healthcare, Jobcentre registration, and local orientation.

CSS was inspired by the Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSR), which has resettled over 300,000 refugees since the 1970s (Labman and Cameron, 2020). However, PSR differs significantly from CSS and other sponsorship programmes developed across Europe, particularly because under CSS, beneficiaries are selected by the Government among UNHCR-referred refugees (International Refugee Assistance Project, 2018; RESET, 2023). Sponsorship programmes are developed with the premise that volunteers' involvement can aid refugees'

integration (UNHCR, 2021; GRISI, 2022). Yet the role and support offered by volunteer social networks have received scant empirical attention, especially outside Canada, with little known about how refugees experience the support offered and the extent to which they feel it facilitates access to integration resources. Some claim that the networks developed with sponsors are critical in supporting integration (Schmidtke, 2018). However, others argue that volunteers' efforts cannot guarantee refugees' social inclusion or integration (Gingrich and Enns, 2019; Hynie, 2018).

Some scholars and activists have expressed concern that sponsorship programmes constitute an attempt to privatise refugee resettlement, shifting responsibility from Government to civil society (İlcan and Connoy, 2021). While promoting CSS, countries such as the UK are also introducing policies to limit and deny the right to an in-country asylum claim, implementing a two-tier system of international protection (Karyotis *et al.*, 2021). The development of resettlement and sponsorship programmes must not dismiss countries' obligation to assess in-country asylum claims without discrimination based on the way individuals enter the country (Labman, 2011). Sponsorship should be recognised as an additional means to provide international protection, working alongside established existing mechanisms. As such, CSS can increase the number of resettlement places and may facilitate integration through tailored support from host community members. This article fills a knowledge gap, offering, to the best of our knowledge, the first insight outside of Canada about how sponsored refugees experience support with integration processes.

Refugees and integration

Migrant integration has received great interest from scholars and policymakers, with the term much debated (Abdou and Geddes, 2017). Definitions draw on different aspects of integration, from cultural adaptation to inclusion in social systems, focusing on work and social inclusion (Heckman, 2006). Early work explored acculturation, centring on migrants' cultural adaptation. Berry (1997) described integration as one route to acculturation, involving a combination of retaining one's own culture and adaptation to local conditions. Scholars have gradually shifted from examining solely migrants' role in adaptation (i.e., Gordon, 1964) to understanding integration as a shared responsibility as embodied by the CSS. We favour a broad definition of integration as '*the process of settlement, interaction with the host society, and social change that follows immigration*', incorporating three structures (legal/political, social/economic, cultural/religious), three levels (individual, organisational/collective, institutional), and multiple parties (immigrants, established residents/institutions, etc.) (Garcés-Masareñas and Penninx, 2016: 11).

Recognising forced migrants as a special category of migrants due to the forced nature of their migration (Echterhoff *et al.*, 2020), specific attention has been paid to refugee integration processes. Ager and Strang's (2008) integration indicators framework has been widely utilised across Europe (Valenta and Bunar, 2010) to measure integration outcomes. Updating the Ager and Strang framework in 2019, the UK Government outlined Indicators of Integration to help design policy, assess interventions' success and measure integration outcomes (Ndofor-Tah *et al.*, 2019) (see Figure 1). We utilised this framework because following the 2019 review which sought to account for the development of programmes such as CSS in the UK, it offers the most up-to-date and relevant analytical framework for examining refugee integration in the UK, and with its foundations in the much used (2008) framework it has been widely implemented to great effect. The IoI framework presents fourteen inter-related domains organised into four sets of integration indicators (see Figure 1). *Markers and means* (employment, education, health and social care, housing, and leisure) represent significant arenas considered essential to integration but also means to other integration domains. *Social connections* acknowledge the importance of three kinds of social networks to integration. Social bonds refer to relationships between 'people like me'; social bridges relate to connections with people of a different background; and social links concern connections to institutions. Social connections are seen as supporting integration by



Figure 1. Indicators of Integration Framework (Ndofor-Tah *et al.*, 2019).

facilitating access to resources and enabling a sense of belonging (see Suter and Magnusson, 2015). These relations are at the core of the UK's CSS. Five *Facilitators* (language, culture, digital skills, safety, and stability) outline the crucial capabilities supporting integration processes. *Foundation* includes rights and responsibilities in terms of both migrant and receiving communities.

Four principles underpin the IoI framework. Firstly, Ndofor-Tah *et al.* (2019) stress the multi-dimensional nature of integration processes outlining that accomplishments in one area, such as housing, do not denote integration. Secondly, integration is multi-directional, rather than linear, and can proceed or reverse depending on circumstances, lifecycle, and experiences. The third principle concerns shared responsibility: the majority population, refugees, institutions, local, and national governments all play a role. Finally, integration is context specific and can only be measured in relation to particular individuals and specific locations. Factors such as age, gender, vulnerability levels, and education should also be considered. Contextual factors include the socio-political environment, levels of urbanisation or rurality, and the degrees of population diversity in resettlement areas and workplaces (Phillimore *et al.*, 2021). In the next section, we examine the state of knowledge around the indicator areas.

Sponsorship and refugee integration processes

Integration takes place across diverse combinations of domains for different refugees, but the 'social connections' domain is seen as 'key to both the definition and achievement of integration' (Ndofor-Tah *et al.*, 2019: 16). Social connections' importance is often linked to the formation of social capital (Burt, 2000), that is individuals' capacity to acquire benefits through the investment in their membership of social networks (Portes, 1998). Such investment may be significant for refugees resettling in a new country as developing new relationships can improve access to information, power, and identity (Adler and Kwon, 2000), which are important in refugee integration.

The works of Putnam (2000) and Granovetter (1973) have significantly influenced our understanding of social networks and social capital. Numerous studies, and the IoI framework, have utilised Putnam's concept of bonding and bridging capital (Kelly and Lusia, 2006). Likewise, Granovetter's (1973) distinction between strong and weak ties has been heavily utilised

(Harvey, 2008). Strong ties are characterised by long-lasting reciprocal relationships involving mutual trust and emotional intensity. In contrast, weak ties encompass a broader range of acquaintances moving in different social circles and can provide information unavailable through strong ties.

Weak ties/social bridges connecting people with different types of experience and knowledge can facilitate access to a wide range of information (Reagans and Zuckerman, 2001: 512). In Migration Studies, weak ties are often found to assist migrants in accessing resources such as job opportunities (Poros, 2001; Ryan, 2011), aiding integration. Policymakers in the UK have characterised networks of weak ties connecting majority and minority ethnic groups as supportive of integration (i.e. Casey, 2016; MHCLG, 2018). On the contrary, strong ties/social bonds, characterised by high levels of trust and sharing of resources between co-ethnics or co-religious persons, have been problematised by Government because of concerns that localised information flows undermine social mobility and cohesion (Reagans and Zuckerman, 2001; Casey, 2016) and lead to 'ghettoisation' (Ryan and Mulholland, 2014).

Notably, in distinguishing between network types, much attention has been given to ethnicity and nationality, underestimating networks' dynamicity and transformative power (Kivisto, 2005). One of the key ideas underpinning CSS is that the volunteers offer refugees a pre-formed social bridge network, enabling access to social capital and supporting integration processes (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities *et al.*, 2022). However, as Grzymala-Kazlowska and Phillimore (2018) and Wessendorf and Phillimore (2019) point out, clear majority/minority binaries do not exist, and social bonds can also support integration. Further, Nannestad *et al.* (2008) argue that the development of bonding and bridging connections are not mutually exclusive. Thus, more attention is needed to the resources that all types of relationships can provide (Ryan, 2011).

The UK's CSS, by its very nature, uses volunteers as a ready-made social network to enable refugees to access integration resources and thus refugees might be expected to rely heavily, at least in the first months of arrival, on volunteers. While community involvement has been found to play a key role in supporting the integration processes of Syrian resettled refugees in the UK under VPRS, scholars found that volunteers could not attend to all challenges faced (Madziva and Thondhlana, 2017). Therefore, a more in-depth analysis of the nature of support offered by volunteer sponsors to CSS refugees can help us understand how and to what extent sponsors can support integration processes. Before presenting our findings, we turn to learning from Canada to provide insight into how sponsorship may support refugees across the IoI domains as this is currently the only body of knowledge on the role of sponsorship in integration.

Means and markers

PSRs have higher employment and earning rates than government-assisted refugees (GARs) in the short-term (Hyndman *et al.*, 2017a; Kaida *et al.*, 2020). Differences in earnings can be explained by the actions of sponsors, often family members, pushing refugees to accept jobs in order that they achieve independence quickly (Kaida *et al.*, 2020) or by pre-migration characteristics such as education level (IRCC, 2019; Kaida *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, Hynie *et al.* (2019) find that refugees do not always depend on their sponsors to secure employment. There is a paucity of studies on sponsorship on education and leisure. However, Ritchie (2018) shows that despite sponsors' support, PSRs struggle to have overseas work experience and qualifications recognised and to access higher education.

Regarding housing, some sponsored refugees have been identified as being at risk of homelessness or living in poor housing conditions (St Arnault and Merali, 2019). Sponsors, working with NGOs have established initiatives to address housing shortages, engaging with property owners to facilitate renting for refugees (GRSI, 2022). Health and social care studies show that GARs and PSRs face similar challenges in accessing healthcare, such as medication costs, and

lack of cultural sensitivity and interpreters (Woodgate *et al.*, 2017). However, many PSRs received assistance from their sponsors to access medical care (Oda *et al.*, 2019), with support levels varying across sponsors (Woodgate *et al.*, 2017).

Social connections

Findings about the utility of PSRs' social networks are inconclusive. Syrian PSRs were more likely than GARs to access services and develop social relationships with non-Syrian people, because of their sponsors' networks (Agrawal and Sangapala, 2020). Relationships developed through community organisations such as faith-based groups and libraries were also essential for sponsored refugees' integration processes (Drolet and Moorthi, 2018). In rural areas, the involvement of community members appeared to help refugees access integration opportunities despite the fewer available services than in urban areas (Haugen, 2019). However, Gingrich and Enns (2019), whose study focuses on sponsored refugees without previous connections to Canada, argue that social relationships alone cannot guarantee refugees' access to social capital. Bonding connections, rather than bridging ones, were more likely to enable access to opportunities such as employment and housing (Hanley *et al.*, 2018). Linking relationships with settlement agencies were wider among GARs than PSRs (Hanley *et al.*, 2018; IRCC, 2019).

Facilitators

Few sponsorship studies focus on Facilitators beyond language acquisition (Morrice *et al.*, 2021). The 2015–2016 Syrian Refugee Initiative outcomes study shows that PSRs settled more easily than GARs because of the language support sponsors offered (Jedwab, 2018). However, rapid access to employment, encouraged by sponsors, led PSRs to focus less on language acquisition, reducing the quality of job opportunities and earnings outcomes in the long term (Hyndman and Hynie, 2016; Kaida *et al.*, 2020). PSRs and GARs showed similar levels of life satisfaction, although PSRs (62.7 per cent) had a weaker sense of belonging to Canada than GARs (72.2 per cent) (Jedwab, 2018).

A few studies highlight how sponsorship programmes can create a welcoming environment for refugees, with sponsors becoming 'trusted messengers' and increasing positive attitudes towards newcomers (Schmidtke, 2018; Bond, 2021). Sponsor-refugee encounters can positively influence the meanings of cultural diversity and successful integration (Schmidtke, 2018). But little is known about how these social connections enable sponsored refugees to achieve integration outcomes beyond employment (Stansbury, 2021).

Methods

The data utilised in this article was collected for an independent formative evaluation of the UK's CSS (Authors various). Interviews were undertaken with volunteers and refugees between 2017 to 2020 covering refugees' arrival and integration experiences, types of support offered, and the nature of relations between refugees, volunteers, and local communities. Herein we engage with the data collected from refugee adults. Author two worked with the UK's sponsorship charity, Reset, to identify, approach, and invite CSS groups to participate in the project. Authors one and two selected groups from diverse and less diverse areas across the UK, including secular and faith-based groups¹. We sought variation in local levels of diversity because initial discussions with NGOs suggested that the nature of refugee experience varied depending on context reflecting one of the IoI core principles.

Author one, a native Arabic speaker, interviewed sixty-one adults in Arabic, of whom thirty-four were women, supported by twenty-five different groups. Some thirty-two lived in diverse areas and twenty-nine in less diverse areas. Respondents ranged between eighteen and sixty-five

Table 1. Respondent profile

	Less diverse	Diverse	Total
Men	13	15	28
Women	16	17	33

years of age with three originating in Iraq and the remainder Syria. Table 1 shows the number of interviewees by gender and the diversity of location.

Full ethical approval was received from the University of Anonymised Ethical Review Committee. We paid particular care to consent processes. We first approached CSS group leaders who asked refugee adults if they would speak with Author one, who telephoned each person to explain the study’s purpose in Arabic, answer their questions, and ask if they wished to participate. Those accepting were sent a participant information form and given a further opportunity to ask questions. All documents were available in Arabic and English. Respondents could withdraw from the study up to thirty days after their interview with data being destroyed. Respondents were informed on three occasions, twice in Arabic, that participation was voluntary. Author one has reflected on her positionality in Author (X), as a practising Muslim, a migrant from an Arab country, and a native Arabic speaker, she quickly reassured potential respondents that there was no obligation to participate. The trust developed between the interviewer and interviewees was evidenced by participants’ willingness to criticise CSS and individual volunteers and contacts made with Author one after being interviewed. We recognise, however, that our access to refugee respondents was limited by the agreement of sponsors acting as gatekeepers and this may have meant that our access was denied to some refugees who perhaps had more negative experiences than those we interviewed. However, the respondents interviewed shared a wide range of experiences both negative and positive.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed into Arabic, and then translated into English. The data was analysed in English using a systematic thematic approach (see Guest *et al.*, 2011) to identify codes with the codes shaped by the IoI framework and also identified inductively. In the following findings section, interviewee quotes are labelled as: gender (M/F), duration of resettlement in the UK, and then L (less diverse area) or D (diverse area). Findings are organised using the IoI, here functioning as a heuristic organising device. All data and locations have been anonymised.

Findings

Means and markers

Upon arriving in the UK, refugees must register for welfare benefits, a complex bureaucratic process requiring a UK bank account. Volunteers with often limited knowledge of the welfare system sought assistance from their networks, providing refugees with access to specialised knowledge. Delays in receiving benefits sometimes left refugees destitute, whereupon volunteers provided financial assistance until benefits arrived. In some cases, refugees were given additional funds to supplement their benefits.

While sharing of time and finances supported integration and enabled access to wider services and education opportunities, middle-class volunteers had no experience of living on a low income. Some refugees struggled to make ends meet and received unhelpful information from volunteers suggesting they shop at expensive supermarkets, unaware of more affordable options. Key insider knowledge about where to shop cheaply and access specialised foodstuffs came from connections with co-ethnics with experience of living in poverty out of place.

I was very surprised, to be honest. It was large, with a garden, and because of the support from the group, it was stocked with many things. There are some things they provided I still use to this day, nine months later, from household items to clothes even. (M, nine months, D)

Male refugees' top priority was to be economically self-sufficient. Accessing work was challenging because of language barriers. Some felt trapped in poverty and struggled to see a way out. Viewing their primary role as taking responsibility for their family, not being able to work undermined men's self-confidence and led to some feeling useless:

Here I feel a new type of pain and distraught I do not feel like a man anymore, I mean I do not feel like I can look after my own family this is because I feel like a human that has expired and useless. (M, fourteen months, LD)

Moreover, most volunteers lacked the resources and experience to help refugees gain entry-level work or get overseas qualifications recognised. As a result, refugees felt frustrated. Volunteers facilitated links with the Jobcentre and explained refugees' complex situation to frontline workers who, in less diverse areas, had not encountered refugees previously. These efforts were said to encourage frontline workers to be more sympathetic to refugees' situation. In less diverse areas, participants faced difficulties in accessing public transport, leading to missed appointments and challenges in accessing employment. Some refugees said they relied on volunteers driving them or gifting them driving lessons.

CSS volunteers' responsibilities include securing suitable housing, but affordable options within welfare benefit limits are scarce nationwide. Sponsors leveraged their personal networks to identify suitable accommodation, donated by friends, or gifted welfare benefit –subsidies, to enable refugee occupancy. Many respondents lived in poor-quality unstable housing while awaiting resettlement, so arriving at a secure home made them feel safe and comfortable. Housing mostly exceeded expectations and signalled an end to the trauma of displacement while providing a foundation for rebuilding their lives. Respondents appreciated sponsors' efforts to furnish the house and fill it with groceries and gifts, enabling refugees to settle in quickly.

CSS volunteers also facilitated access to healthcare. Their knowledge of the healthcare system aided the smooth navigation of systems acknowledged to be complex (Green *et al.*, 2014). Volunteers helped refugees register with a doctor, arranged appointments and transportation, and sometimes accompanied respondents. Refugees with health conditions were assisted with childcare, cooking, and housework while undergoing treatments. Resources shared included knowledge and time, but also emotional support and reassurance. For example, a refugee who arrived with a cancer diagnosis explains:

They immediately took me to the GP, James took me, and explained everything to the doctor, and I also had an interpreter present. I was told I would receive a letter from the hospital, where I went. (M, nine months, D)

Most respondents argued that their main reason for seeking resettlement was to do the best for their children, with education being a key priority. All respondents were given the help needed to find school places. Volunteers also provided children with individual tutoring to support them with schoolwork.

Many refugees expressed their joy in spending days out getting to know their areas better. Volunteers often arranged these trips that provided opportunities to strengthen social ties while supporting respondents' wellbeing. Interviewees were offered opportunities to participate in activities such as cycling, walking, and Pilates through the provision of equipment and expertise. Volunteers were said to work hard to build refugees' confidence to get outdoors, enjoy their lives, and be healthy.

Social connections

Respondents' connections evolved over time, as relations deepened, and common ground emerged. Connections in one type of network, such as those with people from the same ethnic background, facilitated strong ties and sometimes led to connections with other kinds of networks as individuals were introduced to other people or institutions. All respondents quickly developed relationships with 'people like me'. CSS refugees in diverse areas connected with local Arabic-speaking communities in person, while those in less diverse areas connected via social media. Co-ethnic ties enabled access to information about life in the UK and employment opportunities. Importantly they provided a source of emotional support and a sense of cultural safety wherein refugees could 'be me'. Volunteers in less diverse areas were said to be conscious of refugees' need for co-ethnic networks and tried to connect them with other Arabic speakers. Most respondents found these connections useful in the weeks after arrival before establishing their own networks.

Respondents from seven families in less diverse areas reported developing close connections with specific volunteers. These initially weak ties enabled access to emotional, cultural, and social resources beyond those offered by the group. Such connections helped refugees overcome feelings of isolation and believe they had friends to depend on. In some cases, we heard of an intertwining of relations between volunteer and refugee families crossing three generations as they referred to each other as 'family', signalling a shift in the nature of connections as both parties viewed themselves as 'like me', and weak ties evolved into strong ones:

He greets me in the morning, hugs me like my father, makes me a cup of tea. He asked me three times to lace up my boots, and I was too busy, and surprisingly I found him on his knee lacing up my boots. (M, twenty months, LD)

Scope for new migrants to offer reciprocity is acknowledged as important because it helps build self-esteem (Phillimore *et al.*, 2018). Volunteer-refugee relationships were initially quite asymmetrical, with refugees finding few opportunities to reciprocate. Over time, as refugees gained confidence, and connections with some volunteers deepened, reciprocity became more balanced, making relations feel more like friendship.

Refugees without strong local connections reported feeling isolated, intensifying feelings of loss and homesickness. Lack of relationships with local residents potentially undermined wellbeing, reduced opportunities to practice English and understand local culture. While some groups facilitated connections through events and encouraging refugees to share Middle Eastern dishes, respondents desired deeper relations akin to those they had enjoyed back home, where they socialised with and supported neighbours. Shifting relations from cursory to deeper connections could be challenging:

They are neutral, they do not socially mix. Last time, my neighbour was digging a tree near his house, I went and helped him. But, after that, I felt that nothing changed, the relationship continued to be formal. (M, eighteen months, LD)

Some respondents were disappointed that their relationships with sponsors lacked emotional intensity, leaving them feeling that volunteers did not care about them. Some said sponsors did not notice how alone and unhappy they were, but they did not want to burden volunteers or be considered ungrateful. The deepening of relations was undermined by language barriers and left refugees feeling that they could not belong locally. Linking connections outside the sponsoring group were established with organisations such as congregations, healthcare providers, charities, jobcentres, and schools. Volunteers made these introductions, enabling refugees to access a wide range of services and other resources.

Facilitators of integration

Refugees prioritised learning to speak and write English to communicate better with locals. Many refugees received tailored English lessons from volunteers leading to accelerated progress, compared to that made in formal lessons. Many women learned English quickly, which they attributed to learning via their children's schoolwork as well as language lessons. Everyday contact with volunteers provided opportunities to speak English. However, older refugees and those with low literacy or education levels, struggled to learn English in formal lessons. Lack of progress left respondents feeling hopeless and undermined their wellbeing, especially for men, as they realised, they needed to speak English in order to work. Many felt under pressure to learn English quickly to not disappoint volunteers, so the slow pace of learning felt like a failure, even though volunteers did not push them to learn faster.

I found it difficult. They told me they wanted to register me in a college, I was a bit worried as I hadn't really been through the education system, and how would I be after all these years without education. (M, nine months, D)

Respondents needed digital skills to access online services and communicate with families overseas. CSS volunteers provided Wi-Fi and hardware but not training, leaving some adults and elderly refugees without digital literacy. Gradual exposure to life in the UK, frequently explained by volunteers, helped refugees understand 'British culture'. One of the biggest cultural differences refugees encountered concerned work-life balance and socialising patterns. Refugees observed that working life structured people's lives, offering few opportunities for serendipitous encounters, sometimes leaving them feeling isolated.

Refugees valued volunteers' attempts to understand their lives, culture, and religion, which they explained, helped facilitate understanding and deepen social ties. All respondents came from protracted situations in which they had been and felt unsafe, insecure, and experienced discrimination. Respondents spoke of feelings of safety engendered by CSS volunteers, which began at the airport when greeted with Arabic welcome signs, gifts, and smiles. As already noted, providing 'a home' added to feelings of safety. Refugees were surprised at the level of acceptance of their culture and dress. Yet having experienced lengthy periods of instability, some respondents felt permanently insecure. They could not believe they were safe and feared being deported and becoming refugees again. The fact that their leave to remain lasted only for five years was a source of uncertainty. Volunteers could offer little more than reassurance in these situations.

When I saw the house, I felt settled. The interpreter told me what the head of our group had said, "don't be afraid of anything". **You are safe here.** There is nothing to frighten you here at all. (M, four months, D)

Foundations for integration

Respondents expressed concern that their lack of knowledge about their responsibilities undermined their overall feelings of belonging. Many feared they might be deported if they did not adhere to laws yet had not been told 'the rules'. Additionally, refugees often arrived believing they could apply for family reunion and would be able to travel to visit family. Finding out this was not possible in the near future was a source of disappointment, which undermined integration processes with respondents saying they could never feel at home when separated from their families.

'I feel like I have something that makes me extremely sad, it makes me cry daily. I just want to see my family. I just wish, and I tell my husband, that we cannot go to them. But what are these difficult circumstances that prevent me from seeing my mother and father, and siblings'. (F, twelve months, D)

Respondents relied heavily on volunteers for advice, but volunteers lacked knowledge about family reunion and travel. All respondents wanted to become British citizens believing citizenship was a key source of security. Most volunteers lacked the knowledge needed to support refugees' applications.

Discussion and conclusions

This article focuses on refugees' accounts of the usefulness of the support they received from CSS volunteers across the four domains of IoI framework. Built-in support from volunteers, responsible for helping refugees with integration processes, is arguably the added value of the CSS. Refugees were clear that the support received from volunteers was invaluable. They benefitted not just from sponsors' knowledge and experience, but also from the resources yielded via volunteers' relationships with other local people (Granovetter, 1973). Volunteers', and their connections', specialist knowledge operated as a form of social capital, enabling refugees to access complex healthcare, education, and welfare services. In less-diverse areas, support extended from volunteers acting as 'navigators' (Green *et al.*, 2014), explaining refugees' needs and entitlements to service providers who had not encountered refugees before. In this way, sponsors facilitated the adaptation of local providers as well as refugees' learning, sharing the responsibility for integration processes between newcomers and community' members (Ndofor-Tah *et al.*, 2019).

Sponsor-refugee relationships were at the core of integration processes, frequently linking refugees to multiple integration resources and illustrating the multidimensionality of integration processes (Ndofor-Tah *et al.*, 2019). Volunteers helped refugees to meet their goals by giving knowledge, time and care tailored to each refugee individual. The importance of care is rarely considered in integration studies but was viewed as extremely important by respondents who were separated from their loved ones. Connections and the resources they yielded changed over time, reflecting evolutions in power dynamics between refugees and sponsors. Some relations with volunteers became more intimate over time with refugees able to reciprocate the time and care they had received, with reciprocity an important dimension of integration reported elsewhere but not included in the IoI framework (Phillimore *et al.*, 2018). *The shift in relations over-time is rarely considered in studies of integration processes, yet for some refugees a move from bridging connections/weak ties to bonding/strong ties engendered a sense of belonging. That refugees benefitted from connections both with people like them and volunteers reinforces Wessendorf and Phillimore's arguments (2019) that multiple forms of network support integration processes. It also contradicts policy positions around co-ethnic networks inevitably being problematic (MHCLG, 2018). Our findings also raise questions about the tendency in integration studies to dichotomise networks. Clearly, in some instances, sponsor-refugees relations progressed beyond being 'weak' (Granovetter, 1973) and transformed into bonds built on mutual care and shared understanding. Further, where cultural exchanges occurred on a two-way basis, refugees felt understood and appreciated while also gaining valuable insight into life in the UK.*

Although CSS groups generally aided integration processes, there were areas where the support needed fell short, implying the necessity of additional forms of assistance. As largely middle-class retirees, volunteers and their networks lacked knowledge about coping with a low income and accessing entry-level work. In many instances, sponsors were not aware of the need to explain taken-for-granted aspects of UK life. Further, refugees desperately required specialist knowledge around citizenship and family reunion, but volunteers lacked knowledge of the wider immigration system. Sponsors were also powerless in the face of the UK's hostile policy environment and thus could not influence refugees' rights to naturalise or reunite. In Canada, where the 'naming' option allows specification of the person to be resettled, refugees often turn to their sponsors for assistance in reunion via sponsorship of family members (Macklin *et al.*, 2018). Separation from family members has been shown to undermine integration processes (Phillimore *et al.*, 2023).

With volunteers unable to help them to reunite, some refugees felt they would never be able to get on with their lives in the UK.

As Ndofor-Tah *et al.* (2019) and others (i.e., Phillimore *et al.*, 2020) have suggested, the context in which refugees resettled played an important part in shaping integration processes. Refugees' individual and family characteristics, their resettlement location (diverse vs less diverse) and the volunteer group's access to social capital impacted upon the resources available to aid integration. Those residing in more-diverse areas benefitted from connections with co-ethnics and other refugees who could provide insight into being a newcomer, living on a low income and finding specialist foods. However, in less-diverse areas, deeper friendships with some volunteers offered refugees an increased sense of safety and security through a depth of intimacy. There were clear gender differences in experience with women building important social connections via their children's schools (Goodson and Phillimore, 2008). The non-linear (Tacolini Pannagio and Gonzalez Benson, 2019), multi-directional (Ndofor-Tah *et al.*, 2019) nature of integration processes was also evident as respondents initially very hopeful about building a new life started to lose hope when struggling to learn English, gain work, and reunite with family.

Refugees argued the range of support offered by volunteers helped to smooth their settlement, offering a sense of safety, security, and sometimes intimacy, which was highly valued. While sponsored refugees in Canada are said to be pressured into taking work at an early stage, sometimes at the cost of learning the language (Kaida *et al.*, 2020), in the UK the mix of welfare and volunteer support meant refugees could focus on wider aspects of integration which may potentially enable better outcomes in the long-term. Our tentative findings observing the benefits gained by sponsored refugees, alongside CSS volunteers' positive experience reported elsewhere (Phillimore *et al.*, 2020) indicate the sponsorship model has potential to add value to resettlement programmes beyond Canada. Our work supports the narrative of GRSI which is working to promote sponsorship globally. However, programmes should be tailored to the specific contexts of implementation, which may mean different approaches, for example in diverse and less-diverse areas, and, of course, in different countries. Further, it may not be enough to expect volunteers to have sufficient social capital to support all refugees' integration needs (see also Madziva and Thondhlana, 2017). Specialist functions around accessing work, requalification and access to citizenship and reunion, require particular expertise beyond the grasp of volunteers and may be constrained by structural factors.

This study is based on data collected at the early stages of CSS in the UK, largely with Syrian respondents. Further work is needed to examine the opportunities and challenges for sponsorship supporting refugee integration processes. It is important to look at long-term experiences and the outcomes of sponsored refugees, comparing them to those of refugees arriving by other routes and asylum pathways, to assess the added value of sponsorship. Ideally access to sponsored refugees would not be limited by sponsors acting as gatekeepers to ensure the widest range of experiences to be included. Such work should extend to sponsorship programmes in Europe to identify whether there are any common or differentiating features associated with built-in volunteer support.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746424000241>

Note

1 Less diverse areas were defined as those with less than 2 per cent minority ethnic groups.

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