

## **Open Letter for the attention of the Home Secretary The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP**

**From: Community Sponsorship Council**

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the government proposals and plans for immigration as outlined in your New Immigration Plan. The Community Sponsorship Council acknowledges that the Home Office is conducting a consultation on the New Immigration Plan, and appreciates the opportunity to provide our views and recommendations for your consideration. We commend the efforts already made by the Government to resettle 25,000 VPRS refugees, supporting the 'additionality' that the Community Sponsorship scheme brings to these numbers and the new plans to promote integration and inclusion with language provisions and pathways to employment.

With more than 80 million forcibly displaced people around the world and over 26 million recognised refugees under the [UN Convention](#), the growth and development of the Community Sponsorship scheme, introduced by the Rt Hon Theresa May MP when she was Home Secretary, is a vitally important safe and planned pathway for the resettlement of refugees seeking the safety of a welcoming United Kingdom. As members of the newly created Community Sponsorship Council, we recognise the urgency to scale up and increase the number of safe and legal pathways that can welcome and resettle refugees into the UK.

We believe that the UK will not see growth in safe and legal routes, if more pathways are not made available. Also, with no mention of numbers and targets in the New Immigration Plan, the number of refugees will be decided by Local Authorities helped by the available resources for Community Sponsors suggesting that we are on a course for a much lower number of refugees being welcomed through safe and legal routes and in danger of creating no alternatives but for refugees to take up dangerous routes to find sanctuary.

If the Government's desire is to criminalise traffickers and those who seek to exploit the most vulnerable, and if the Government wishes to see safe and legal routes used then it should set targets and increase the number of pathways for refugees and asylum seekers to resettle in this country. The year 2020 has demonstrated very clearly that when safe routes are closed, refugees will take whatever risk is necessary in order to find safety. In times of greatest need at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, countries such as [Portugal](#) extended refugee protection principles and took exemplary steps to safeguard the rights of refugees. These include exemption of asylum-seekers from border restrictions to ensure access to territory, extending the validity of documents and providing access to employment and financial services. We will not see growth in

safe and legal routes if more pathways are not opened and made available. With the absence of numbers from this plan, leaving it down to the capacity of Local Authorities and the scant resources of Community Sponsors, we are concerned that the nation is on course for a much lower number of refugees being welcomed through safe and legal routes and an increase in the use of other unsafe routes.

In the New Plan for Immigration, Community Sponsorship is mentioned as one element of the 'safe and legal routes' arrangements. We have heard strongly from those participating in the Community Sponsorship Scheme that their commitment to refugees is to all those in need of help, regardless of how they arrive in the UK. Communities and all those involved in sponsorship do not want to be associated with a system that divides and categorises vulnerable people in the way the new plan proposes. Community Sponsor volunteers are people committed to a fair, compassionate, humane and responsible immigration system that welcomes people fleeing conflict and injustice. To achieve this, we need a plan that is fair, compassionate and dignified to all those who are in need of safety regardless of their means of entry.

Community sponsors, represented through the new Community Sponsorship Council, have some serious concerns in relation to the provisions outlined in the New Immigration Plan as it does not provide a coherent, holistic framework in which as a nation we can both welcome and resettle refugees in sufficient numbers to offer a proportionate response to the global displacement of refugees and at the same time offer a humanitarian and compassionate environment that will treat asylum seekers with the dignity and respect they deserve. We do not believe it is possible for Community Sponsorship to flourish if other aspects of the asylum system lead to the poverty and destitution of those who spontaneously arrive but are in equal need of our support.

Community Sponsorship is taking root since the first family arrival in 2016. With over 250 emerging and established Community Sponsor groups across the UK, now is the time to build on this foundation and decisively invest in its growth.

We respectfully ask for a strategy to strengthen and future proof the scheme to enable Community Sponsorship to carry out this new, exciting and challenging responsibility set out in the New Plan for Immigration.

We, the undersigned, welcome the opportunity to present our proposals and recommendations to you.

Signatories:

COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP GROUPS

Aberaid

Addiscombe Welcomes Refugees

Ashtead Churches Community Trust

Barnstaple Community Welcome

Bath Welcomes Refugees

Bridport Refugee Support Campaign

Bromley Salvation Army Church Community Sponsorship Group

Budleigh Syrian Community Sponsorship

Canterbury Welcomes Refugees

Cardiff Central Council of the St Vincent de Paul Society

CHARIS Taunton

CHARIS Exeter

Chulmleigh Community Welcome

Croeso Cowbridge

E123 Welcomes Refugees

East Dunbartonshire Welcomes Refugees

Epsom & Ewell Refugee Network

Hedge End Salvation Army Community Sponsorship Group

Herne Hill Welcomes Refugees

Hythe Community Sponsorship Group

King's Arms Project

Kingsbridge Community Sponsorship Group

Old Swan Welcomes

Oxford Welcomes Refugees  
Peckham Sponsors Refugees  
Pompey Reset  
Raynes Park Community Church  
Refugee Matters (Fareham)  
Refugee ReSETTLEMENT Community Sponsorship Group  
Refugees Welcome Wolverton  
South Leicestershire Community Sponsorship Group  
South Liverpool Churches  
Sutton Salvation Army Church Community Sponsorship Group  
Tarka Community Refugee Sponsors  
TodaRe  
Uplyme Community Sponsorship  
Welcome Syrian Families  
Westbury Welcomes  
West Hampstead Welcomes  
Whitechapel Welcomes

#### LEAD SPONSORS

Caritas Diocese of Salford  
Caritas Shrewsbury  
Catholic Care (Diocese of Leeds)  
CHARIS  
Pickwell Foundation

Refugee Support Europe

Refugee Welcome Diocese of Chelmsford

Resettle Community Sponsorship Group, Guildford

South Cheltenham Churches

Sponsor Refugees, Citizens UK

Tyneside Welcomes

#### OTHER

Cornwall Refugee Resource Network

Community Sponsorship Council

Diocese of Canterbury Kent Refugee Officer

Epsom & Ewell Refugee Network

Reset Communities & Refugees

Sharon Kane

Anna Wright

South West Community Sponsorship Network

The Salvation Army United Kingdom with Ireland

UK Welcomes Refugees

---

## **Recommendations**

### **1 A New Immigration Plan with Clear Multi-Year Targets on Numbers**

The New Immigration Plan states that in 2019, 16,000 illegal arrivals were detected in the UK and that in the summer of 2020, the number of people crossing the English Channel in small boats reached record levels, with 8,500 crossings. Expanding the numbers of refugees who arrive through resettlement routes is vital to prevent thousands of dangerous crossings and loss of life. We would like to see a UK Resettlement Scheme that is at least as generous as the now ended VPRS, with clear targets and timelines.

The lack of clarity on targets set for resettlement numbers in the new UK Resettlement Scheme diminishes the salience of 'additionality', which has been a powerful motivating factor for local groups. Community Sponsorship will not match the scale of local authority-led resettlement, and the Community Sponsorship Council is adamant that its model of high-quality, personal, community-led resettlement will best flourish alongside an ambitious local authority-led programme that can deliver resettlement at a scale appropriate to the UK's responsibility for global refugee protection. We are concerned that this lack of clarity will result in the loss of social capital, disincentive potential sponsors, and encourage them to simply lobby Local Authorities to resettle rather than becoming sponsors. Community Sponsorship Groups want to make a difference and the Scheme is founded on the difference they make.

### **2 Long Term Capacity Building Strategy**

With a long term plan to use the Community Sponsorship model to bring people to safety, there needs to be a sustained commitment to properly resourcing Community Sponsorship - the charities and organisations acting as Lead and Principal Sponsors and the infrastructure needed to support them. Sponsors are committed to scaling up and growing Community Sponsorship and have a unique access to committed volunteers, expertise and institutions across the UK. The sponsor network is in need of financial investment to deliver a quality and world beating service.

### **3 Backdating Indefinite Leave to Remain**

We welcome future plans to award indefinite leave to remain, upon arrival in the UK to all resettled individuals. However, we would recommend backdating Indefinite Leave to Remain to those who have been already resettled as many families fear that once

applying for this they may be subject to the Safe Return Policy checks and sent back to their countries of origin. This brings a large degree of uncertainty and poses barriers to long-term plans to integrate in the fabric of a new society.

#### **4 Partnership work with Local Authorities**

The Plan places more emphasis on partnership between LAs and CSGs. Community Sponsorship Groups value collaboration with councils, especially once the family has arrived, but it remains a dismaying fact that one of the biggest barriers to the scaling of community sponsorship is the role of the local authority in delaying the application process.

Under the current Community Sponsorship Scheme, local councils can exercise a veto on any local community sponsorship application, and more damagingly, can often take many months to provide consent. There is no defined or accountable process by which councils must provide or withhold consent, and there is no timeline either, leaving local community sponsorship groups in limbo.

Local Community Sponsorship Groups often feel like they are applying twice – once to the council and once to the Home Office, because under-resourced local authority staff sometimes feel (erroneously) that they have to vet a complete application. The delays caused damage to morale, cost the local community sponsorship group money, and deter repeat sponsorships by a local group who are exhausted after resettling one family.

Local authorities have a legitimate role in the community sponsorship scheme, but this should be restricted to:

- providing in-principle consent at a political level for a local community sponsorship application within a set timescale (such as within two months from submission);
- having a more clearly-defined role in advising the Community Sponsorship Group at the point in which the matching of the family takes place and the resettlement plan is developed (which is the stage at which their input is most helpful and pertinent to the local council's role);
- providing final consent at a political level within a set timescale once a family has been identified and a plan for housing, education and safeguarding has been completed (this should take no more than one month from submission).

## **5 Family Reunion**

We welcome the review of family reunion and the inclusion of unmarried dependent children up to 21 years of age. In addition, we believe that 'Naming' in the context of Family Reunion Pathways will assist the resettlement and integration process and also help grow the numbers involved in Community Sponsorship by increasing the options through a new, safe and legal pathway and encourage existing Community Sponsorship groups to sponsor again to reunite separated refugee families.

## **6 Better Immigration Services, Particularly in Rural Areas**

We are aware of the difficulties to allocate vulnerable refugee families in rural areas lacking services to address specific needs. This contrasts with an appetite in rural communities to be part of the Community Sponsorship movement and bring people into safety. We feel that there are systemic barriers to deploying social capital emerging from rural areas resulting in non-approval from Local Authorities to proceed with the scheme. Taking the examples of Portugal and Canada, the [One Stop Shop](#) model streamlines services to immigrants into one service location. Whether information is sought on housing, employment, visas, banking, schools and hospitals or recreation, these services can help settling into a new neighbourhood and can be offered beyond immigration and integration purposes to the whole community.