



## Focus Group Workshop Report

### SUMMARY:

The AMIF PPI Private sponsorship for integration: building an European model project is a Europe-wide project which aims to develop and assess the impact of 'humanitarian corridors' for refugees to Europe, focusing on private and community sponsorship schemes. As part of the project, partners in Italy and France are currently implementing community sponsorship schemes primarily for Syrian refugees from Lebanon. Safe Passage International is involved in the process of sharing learning and best practice, by conducting and disseminating research on community sponsorship schemes in the UK, through desk-based research and focus groups/interviews with participants. Citizens UK and Sponsor Refugees, as the largest Lead Sponsor in the UK, has been commissioned to co-ordinate the Focus Groups.

### PURPOSE AND OUTCOMES:

The purpose of the focus groups was to enable refugees with direct experience of community sponsorship to contribute their perspective to the research.

### PROFILE:

- Participant Selection:
  - A wide range of Community Sponsorship Groups across the UK were emailed with information about the workshops and requested to ask their sponsored family if they would like to participate. A list of potential participants was created.
  - Participants were selected from this list on the basis of a balance of genders, ages and geographical locations in the UK. Each potential participant was contacted by an Arabic-speaking researcher ahead of the workshop to ensure informed consent.
- Focus Groups:
  - It was decided to organise two focus groups. A focus group for women took place on Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> September from 18:00-19:00 via Zoom. A focus group for men took place on Friday 25<sup>th</sup> September from 18:00-19:00 via Zoom;
  - The focus groups were facilitated by Sahar al-Faifi and Rasha Morad Agha, and the findings written up by by Jonathan Cox.
  - To enable participation of those unable to attend the focus group due to work, healthcare or caring responsibilities, some participants were interviewed separately.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

<b>Number of</b>	21	<b>Gender:</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
<b>Participants</b>			57%	43%

<b>Age range</b>	<b>Under 18</b>	<b>18-35</b>	<b>35-50</b>	<b>50+</b>
	14%	62%	24%	0%
<b>English Language Level on arrival</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Basic</b>	<b>Intermediate</b>	<b>Fluent</b>
	95%	5%	0%	0%
<b>Transit country (all participants were Syrian)</b>	<b>Jordan</b>	<b>Lebanon</b>	<b>Turkey</b>	<b>Not known</b>
	19%	10%	14%	57%
<b>Time in the UK</b>	<b>&lt;3 months</b>	<b>3-12 months</b>	<b>1-2 years</b>	<b>2 years+</b>
	0%	10%	57%	33%
<b>Area of Resettlement</b>	<b>London</b>	<b>Wales</b>	<b>South West</b>	<b>Other</b>
	48%	29%	23%	0%
<b>Type of Host Community</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Small town</b>	<b>Large town</b>	<b>City</b>
	19%	33%	0%	48%

## SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION:

- **How and when did they arrive in the UK?**

Most participants had been in the UK for less than two years. All were Syrian nationals who had arrived in the UK as part of the Community Sponsorship programme.

- **What were their expectations before they arrived?**

Expectations prior to departure were mixed. Most did not fully understand what community sponsorship was before they arrived, though some were aware that they were sponsored (eg F6). There was a common expectation that they would be provided with housing, healthcare and schooling. All viewed coming to the UK through the lens of better educational and health opportunities for their children.

- **What information did they receive before they arrived?**

The quality and delivery of pre-departure information they received varied but was not viewed favourably. There was a consensus that the official information provided in Lebanon was superior to that provided by the Jordanian authorities.

M4 complained about the resources provided in Jordan. They did include a summary of information about the location, who was going to welcome them, and picture of their rooms – but the print quality was poor quality and monochrome. M4 also reported that he had used facebook groups to find out about the community he was being resettled in. M6 said that had only received information three days before departure. M2 and his family struggled to find out about the small town they now live in because the information provided before departure was misleading about the exact location, referencing the (large and rural) county rather than the specific town.

- **What was their experience on arrival? Did their experience meet expectations?**

Participants were overwhelmingly positive about their experience upon arrival. They described a warm welcome at the airport (one man described his arrival as being “like a party in the airport”. F2 described how she met by “5 people or more, and each one had some way to help us.” Another participant reflected that “everything was perfect” with his arrival experience. M6 said: “I felt like I was part of a family when I arrived”. F2 was surprised to find a fully-equipped home and school uniforms etc. when they arrived: “It exceeded our expectations.” M5 described the shock of arriving in a remote rural location, and the

additional costs of having halal food delivered. Overall, though pre-departure expectations were quite limited, they were exceeded.

- **What support did they receive from the local volunteers?**

There was widespread praise for the support provided by the Community Sponsorship Groups. F6 said: "They provided everything. They arranged GPs, schools, helped us understand letters, and even took us to the shops to show which food is halal and which is not." Others appreciated the strong cultural understanding of sponsors, shown their understanding of cultural practices around handshakes and the removal of shoes in the household. M2 and M6 expressed that they felt lucky that they came through Community Sponsorship, as they knew other refugees who had come through council-led resettlement and were struggling. M6 said: "There are more people to help us than the council-supported refugees have, and sometimes they only get support for six months while we are helped for two years." IC2, a child, spoke warmly of her Community Sponsorship Group and the support they provided to her and her siblings: "They are not letting us need anything."

- **Did they have help from local interpreters?**

All participants had benefited from interpreters. One participant explained that she had had an interpreter for first three months and then it stopped. Now she uses the telephone translation services provided by public services and uses Google translate. Although most participants arrived with little or no English, most do not need help with this now – they are more independent now.

- **What has their experience been with education/employment?**

There was a marked difference in how men and women responded to this question. Of the women, three of them are volunteering (one for the Red Cross, as an Arabic language teacher) and all are studying English. One had prior education in Syria, has completed GCSEs in the UK and aspires to go to university. None are in work.

Of the men of working age, half were in work (eg plumber, electrician) while half were not working. Of those not working, two have serious health conditions while another has worked but ended up losing income due to Universal Credit and so gave up his work. M1 was frustrated by this: "I really want to contribute through work, but Universal Credit means it is better to stay on benefits." M5, who is unable to work due to health reasons, described that he had three children, but only received benefits for two. M4 was too ill to work but saw volunteering as a way to pay back the community in gratitude for resettlement.

- **What do they think has been done well through the scheme and by local groups?**

There was consistent praise for the local groups. Participants loved the personal welcome and support, the connection made with other families (especially in rural areas), signposting to the right services, celebration of the children's birthdays, and the trips they took them on. M2 praised the organisation of his group: "There are multiple people in the group and each has a role to help. A doctor helps with healthcare, a teacher with education – they are very well-matched." F1 said: "They welcomed us – they gave us the best welcome."

- **What do they think could have been done better regarding support from volunteers or the organisation of the scheme?**

All participants felt happy with the support from volunteers, but were keen on additional English learning provision. Some participants wished there were more community sponsorship groups so that they could bring their families to the UK. M1 said: "That would really make it feel like home."

- **What has their relationship with local institutions and services been like? (religious institutions; schools; social services; healthcare)**

Participants were divided by the nature of the community in which they lived, and by the nature of their community sponsorship group. F6 lives in a flat in a synagogue and felt a close connection to the Jewish community. Families in rural areas felt remote from mosques, but closer connections with sponsorship group. F7 was not bothered by the distance from the mosque and saw the positives of living in a quieter area compared to the more diverse nearby city. Most participants were satisfied with local health & social services and appreciated the support of their Community Sponsorship group in accessing them. The children interviewed spoke positively of their schools.

- **To what extent do they feel connected to the local community?**

Those living in rural areas felt they had no option but to connect with the people living locally, as there was no existing Syrian or Arabic-speaking community. F4 said: "The kindness of the people makes you forget your homesickness." None reported any discrimination or abuse. Those living in large cities found it easier to meet others from similar cultures, but also reported connections with friends from multicultural backgrounds.

- **Relationships with other people from refugee backgrounds?**

F4 is actively involved in helping with other Syrian refugee families. In her rural area 5-6 households have been connected up. Some families felt lonely and have valued the opportunity to connect. M2 reported that he did reach out to Syrian people already living in his community, but they were not helpful.

- **Did they receive support from the group in their English language learning? How was this?**

Yes. All were signposted to ESOL provision, but it was not sufficient. F2 said: "Four hours of ESOL two days a week is not enough to learn English." M7 had been learning English remotely at his college during Lockdown. Older men reported struggling with the language, but described supporting their children to learn, and then relying on them to read letters etc.

- **Transition: What happens after 12 months integration support ends?**

Four of the participants had been in the UK for over 12 months. Most did not describe community sponsorship as having 'ended' because they were still living in the same communities, and receiving some form of support from their sponsors.

- **Dependency vs Empowerment**

All participants reported a growing sense of independence. F4 is particularly independent and helping other families. She had studied in Syria, has done GCSEs in the UK, and is seeking to go to university. F5 still needs help with understanding formal letters. One family has a car and the husband is able to drive. English and driving were key forms of empowerment sought by women.

- **Meaning of Integration:**

There was general agreement about the definition of integration among the women. Learning English was seen as a key first step towards integration. One participant talked about wanting her family to be active contributors to the community. Another defined integration as interacting with people who might not belong to your group. Another spoke of finding your own way, through education or other means.

The men spoke more of being an active participant in the community, friendships, that children are educated to university level, becoming part of society, and that you don't face discrimination and racism. M6 said: "I feel independent, but I will still need more support to integrate further." M1 was happy that he has all the rights of a British Citizen (other than voting). M2 said that he knew that integration was important, and he wanted to give a good

impression of Syrians. IM3 emphasised the importance of English as a means of communication and saw his friendships with British people as evidence of his integration.

There was clear evidence of the children integrating more quickly than their parents, and that community sponsorship helped this by providing a wide range of people in the community with whom the refugees could build relationships. The children reported learning English, excelling at school, speaking Welsh, and developing significant career aspirations. IC3, aged 4, wants to be a doctor when he grows up.

## **CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

Participants had an overwhelmingly positive view of their experience of community sponsorship, based on the warmth of the welcome at community level, the excellence of the support and signposting provided, and the diverse range of skills and connections available through the volunteers. However, they also identified a number of areas where improvements could be made:

- *The Home Office should ensure international partners (especially in Jordan) provide appropriate information to refugees in a timely manner prior to departure.*
- *Local authorities and Community Sponsors should significantly increase the provision of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes.*
- *Strategic Migration Partnerships and Community Sponsors should increase assistance to resettled refugees in rural communities to access transport and halal products.*
- *Strategic Migration Partnerships should consider encouraging multi-faith chaplaincies (including Muslim chaplains) to rural areas remote from diverse religious communities.*
- *The UK Government should reinstate the ability to take the Driving Theory Test in Arabic to enable refugees to become mobile and independent more quickly.*
- *The Home Office should make the process of obtaining UK citizenship easier, quicker and less expensive.*
- *The Department for Work and Pensions should reform Universal Credit to enable people to start working without losing out financially.*
- *Local Community Sponsorship Groups should increase ESOL support and assistance into employment.*

**Sahar al-Faifi, Rasha Morad Agha and Jonathan Cox – September 2020**

## APPENDIX 1: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

### Focus Group 1: Participants

Code	Age	Gender	Country of Origin	Year resettled	Area of resettlement
F1	18-35	Female	Syria (Homs) came from Lebanon	2020	City, London City, London
F2	18-35	Female	Syria (Daraa) came from Jordan	2019	Rural, South West
F3	18-35	Female	Syria (Damascus countryside) came from Lebanon	2017	Small town, Wales
F4	18-35	Female	Syria (Daraa)	2017	Rural, South West
F5	18-35	Female	Syria (Daraa) came from Jordan	2019	Rural, South West
F6	18-35	Female	Syria came from Turkey	2019	City, London
F7	18-35	Female	Syria	2018	Small town, Wales

### Focus Group 2: Participants

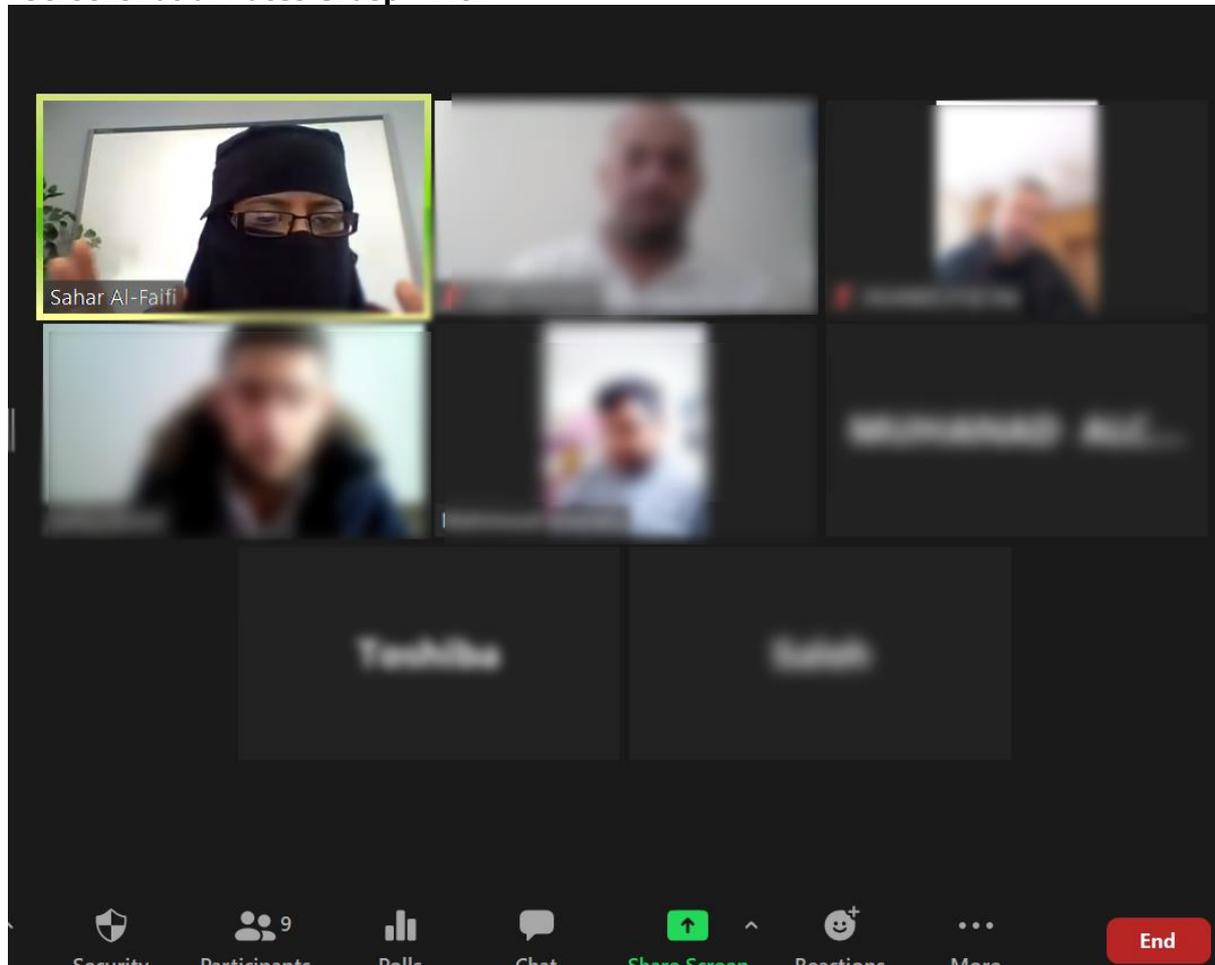
Code	Age	Gender	Country of Origin	Year resettled	Area of resettlement
M1	18-35	Male	Syria (Daraa)	2019	City, London
M2	35-50	Male	Syria (Damascus countryside)	2017	Small town, Wales
M3	35-50	Male	Syria (Daraa)	2019	City, London
M4	35-50	Male	Syria (Daraa) came from Jordan	2017	Rural, South West
M5	18-35	Male	Syria (Homs)	2020	Small town, South West
M6	35-50	Male	Syria (Homs)	2019	City, London
M7	18-35	Male	Syria (Homs)	2019	City, London

### Interviewees:

<b>Code</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Year resettled</b>	<b>Area of resettlement</b>
<b>IC1</b>	Under 18	Male	Syria (Damascus countryside)	2017	Small town, Wales
<b>IC2</b>	Under 18	Female	Syria (Damascus countryside)	2017	Small town, Wales
<b>IC3</b>	Under 18	Male	Syria (Damascus countryside)	2017	Small town, Wales
<b>IM1</b>	18-35	Male	Iraq (came from Turkey)	2018	City, London
<b>IM2</b>	18-35	Male	Syria (Halab)	2018	City, London
<b>IM3</b>	18-35	Male	Syria (Daraa) came from Jordan	2019	City, London
<b>IF1</b>	35-50	Female	Iraq (came from Turkey)	2018	City, London

**APPENDIX 2: PHOTOGRAPHS**

**Screenshot of Focus Group – Men**



## Screenshot of Focus Group - Women

