

# #REFUGEESWELCOME

## A Citizens' guide to private sponsorship of refugees

At the first meeting of the National Refugee Welcome Board on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2015 members agreed the following joint position:

At the heart of the #refugeeswelcome outpouring is an unprecedented desire on the part of members of the public and civil society organisations to do more to help resettle refugees in the UK in practical ways.

But at present there is little or no way to channel that desire into action. Unless this changes a positive situation could become a negative one. Not only will a precious opportunity to increase refugee protection in the UK be lost, but people who wanted to help will feel frustrated, even spurned.

The National Refugee Welcome Board regards the development of private sponsorship schemes as an essential element of enhanced refugee resettlement into the UK in coming years and commits itself to working to putting viable schemes in place. These would be complementary with and additional to existing resettlement arrangements but would channel the obvious public and civic society desire to play a practical role in welcoming more resettled refugees. We therefore urge the government to carry forward its work to develop private sponsorship as an element of the UK's commitment to resettlement and we indicate our collective commitment to assisting actively in that process through our own networks and through partnership with local authorities, NGOs and resettlement providers.

Within a week the Home Secretary Theresa May told the Conservative Party conference the following:

I know the whole country was proud of the generosity of spirit shown by the British businesses and families who offered to shelter Syrian refugees in their own properties this summer. So to help turn these acts of humanity into reality, we'll establish a register of people and organisations that can provide houses for the settlement of refugees. We'll develop a community sponsorship scheme, like those in Canada and Australia, to allow individuals, charities, faith groups, churches and businesses to support refugees directly

The other main parties are also supportive of private sponsorship as they indicated at the Citizen's Action at Westminster on 13<sup>th</sup> October and so there's a real chance of it being introduced relatively quickly.

One thing that would speed that process along is a groundswell of potential sponsors coming forward to indicate their interest.

At this stage, we don't know any of the detail, but it is possible to outline what a sponsorship scheme in the UK would look like and to provide sufficient

information to allow people to register an early interest. Set out below is such information and then some ideas for what might come next.

## **What a private refugee sponsorship scheme in the UK might look like?<sup>1</sup>**

For private refugee sponsorship to happen the following two essential things need to be in place

- The government needs to be willing to allow refugees to enter the country via this route and to have set up a system
- Private individuals or groups need to be organised and have sufficient funds to support the sponsored refugees who are allowed in

On the first of these, there is already a commitment from the Home Secretary and the Home Office is actively working on implementing it. And if the second was in place it would go a long way to turning that pledge into a reality. So how can that happen?

In the FAQs section on the official site on private sponsorship in Canada, the country which has the longest standing and most developed model, one of the first questions posed is the big one, the potential deal breaker: **How much?**

The answer given is rather vague and bureaucratic.

*One rule of thumb is that sponsors are expected to provide a level of support that is at least equal to that of the prevailing rates for social assistance in the expected community of settlement for twelve months*

In Canada, in cash terms, that works out as approximately \$12,600 for an individual rising to between \$20-30,000 for a family, depending on size. If UK sponsors were expected to cover the same costs as Canadian sponsors (and of course there are likely to be some differences – see below) then the sums for UK sponsors could be something like the following:

**£10,000 to £12,000 for an individual**  
**£ Up to-20,000 for a family<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> This of course is an exercise in educated guesswork, but private sponsorship of refugees has been happening for some years so it is possible to sketch out a model (or models) for the UK based on the experience of other countries. It is important to say at the outset that while private sponsorship can work well and be a valuable addition to other forms of refugee resettlement (and other forms of protection) that isn't always the case. The scheme set out here is one that the author (and the author only) regards as a reasonable model of good practice based on his research. If the scheme the government comes forward differed markedly in a negative way from this it may be that the National Refugee Welcome Board and others would decide not to engage. However, this paper is written in a positive spirit in the hope that the scheme that is introduced in the UK is a good one.

This doesn't necessarily mean that sponsors would have to demonstrate up front that they had this sum of money in a bank account. But they would have to demonstrate to administering authorities that they could provide this level of support either through direct cash support or support in kind (free accommodation, for example) over the 12 month period of sponsorship<sup>3</sup>.

On top of this financial and material support there are other forms of support sponsors need to provide. But before turning to that, let's consider the other big question: **Who?**

In a nutshell<sup>4</sup>, it's likely people will be able to come to this country through a private sponsorship route only if they were accepted as refugees by the British government *before* they travel to the UK (and in all probability, excluding anyone already in the EU.) In other words, though private sponsorship might well offer a route for settled refugees in the UK to bring in family members, even from extended family networks, they would only be allowed in if they qualified as a refugee in the eyes of the British government in their own right<sup>5</sup>. They wouldn't be admitted *just* because they were family members of a recognised refugee here.

So private sponsored refugees in that sense would be similar to refugees coming through other existing government funded resettlement programmes, Gateway (for non-Syrians)<sup>6</sup> or VPRS (for Syrians)<sup>7</sup>. That said, while vulnerability is a key criterion for entry under these schemes (people with

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<sup>2</sup> These ball park figures are based on income support rates and housing benefit rates. In certain places, London and the South East costs could certainly be higher.

<sup>3</sup> In Canada, sponsored refugees are given a loan to pay for their flight and are expected to pay it back in due course. If they can't, the sponsor is sometimes asked to pay. It is assumed that under a British model that either the government would pay for the flights of sponsored refugees (as they do for other resettled refugees) or a loan would be offered. In Australia, a major controversy of their private sponsorship scheme (which appears to have scuppered it) is that sponsors have to pay a hefty visa application charge in effect doubling the cost. Again, it is assumed the British government will not charge for visa applications (see more in issues)

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed idea of what type of person might qualify to enter the UK under private sponsorship arrangements see sections 2.1 and 2.2  
<http://www.cic.gc.ca/English/resources/publications/ref-sponsor/section-2.asp#a2.1>

<sup>5</sup> So although private sponsorship offers a form of family reunion it differs from the current family reunion arrangements for settled refugees in the UK

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gateway-protection-programme-information-for-organisations/gateway-protection-programme>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/vulnerable-persons-relocation-scheme-for-syrian-nationals>

high health needs for instance) less vulnerable refugees might well be allowed in through private sponsorship.

Under Gateway and VPRS the UN agency UNHCR puts forward refugees who they think need resettlement and the UK government selects who comes here. It is possible that the same could apply to some people coming through a private sponsorship scheme (see more below), but one of the attractive elements of private sponsorship is that it offers sponsors the chance to actively bring in refugees who they particularly want to help. The Canadians call this 'naming' and describe it as follows:

**Naming** – private sponsors can identify the refugees that they wish to sponsor, assuming they meet all the criteria in Canadian law. This principle allows Canadians to respond to refugees of particular concern to them, whether individuals known to them, or from a specific region they are involved with or groups with whom they wish to be in solidarity. It also allows Canadians to respond to refugees they feel are being forgotten by others

The word principle is used here and it is applied to another aspect of the Canadian model which is integral to private sponsorship: **additionality**

This rather clunky word simply means that private sponsorship is **additional** to fully government-funded resettlement schemes. Private sponsorship would be a way of offering protection and a permanent home to *extra* refugees who for one reason or another were not coming through existing programmes.<sup>8</sup>

An obvious question that arises from this: **how many?**

At this stage that is a very difficult question to answer. The only hard facts we have to go on are the numbers coming into countries (or pledged places) where private sponsorship already takes place

- Canada – Since 1998 between 3 & 4,000 annually, recently increased to some 6,000 (not including the emergency response to Syria)<sup>9</sup>
- Germany - According to latest UNHCR figures, 18,500 sponsorship places offered (to Syrians). Approximately 5500 individuals issued private sponsorship visas<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Of course our aim also would be to assist the government in making private sponsorship an on-going scheme through which refugees from all around the world could come to the UK year on year.

<sup>9</sup> Since 1978, when private sponsorship was first established, more than 250,000 refugees have come to Canada through this route.

- Ireland – Just over 100 people resettled through their Syrian Humanitarian Admissions Programme (SHAP). A temporary programme now closed
- Australia – 500 in first year of pilot (see more about problems of Australian model below)

Again Canada might provide an inspiration for the UK - and in two ways.

First private sponsorship started there in 1978 in response to a refugee crisis in Indo-China. By 1980 Canadian individuals, churches etc had formed 30,000 sponsorships (which on top of government assisted-resettlement brought some 60,000 refugees from that crisis into Canada.)

Second, private sponsorship now in Canada is less a crisis response and more an established part of on-going resettlement efforts. The numbers coming in have settled down, but still represent around 50 per cent of total resettlement into Canada.

Taking inspiration from Canada, and looking beyond the current government plan to resettle 20,000 Syrians by 2020, the UK could perhaps commit to 10,000 places annually through fully funded government schemes and a similar number through private sponsorship. This would be bold and ambitious, but not inconceivable.

But none of this will happen unless people step up to be sponsors. Above it was suggested that the financial commitment is likely to be around £10,000 to £20,000 pounds – a lot of money. The question arising from that is **what support are sponsors expected to provide for refugees?**

Following the example of other countries the following is likely:

- Accommodation
- Household utilities
- Food
- Clothing
- Furniture
- Other household goods
- Other day-to-day living expenses

This assumes – and it is reasonable assumption for what might be termed ‘full sponsorship’ (see alternatives below) – that the sponsored refugee is not entitled to access any benefits such as jobseekers’ allowance, disability allowance, tax credits, or housing benefit in the first 12 months they are in

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/files/publications/policy-briefing-series/pb10-protection-europe-refugees-syria-2014.pdf>

the UK and so would be dependent on their sponsor. (In this sense they would differ from other resettled refugees who are entitled to benefits). We can assume that private sponsored refugees would be able to use public services such as the NHS and schools free of charge.

So, private sponsors would be providing all financial and material support to the sponsored refugee for the first 12 months. That said, in other countries, private sponsored refugees are sometimes able to find work and to support themselves within the first year, in which case the cost of sponsorship could turn out to be less than the full amount above.

But there is another important thing to mention. Support could be provided in kind rather than paid for by the private sponsor. So, for instance, the private sponsoring group might include a landlord whose contribution would be to provide furnished accommodation free or at low rent to the refugee individual or family.

However, private sponsorship is not just a financial transaction. It is much more than that and this is what makes it such an attractive proposition. It should be truly relational: individuals directly helping other individuals with whom they have or develop a personal bond. So, as important as the money are things like:

- Helping with language issues (acting as or finding interpreters, accessing English lessons, helping to practice English)
- Helping to register with a doctor and dentist
- Helping to enrol children in school
- Providing orientation for local transport, shops, banks, leisure facilities, places of worship etc
- Being a friend and a person the refugee can always call on
- Helping in the search for employment or enrolment for study

This befriending and mentoring would start right from the time the sponsored refugee arrived in the country, including meeting the refugee off the plane.

All of this means that being part of private sponsorship is a high level commitment, particularly if the sponsoring group is small, for instance a family. This leads to another question: **who can be a sponsor?**

The Home Secretary in her conference speech listed the following

- individuals, charities, faith groups, churches and businesses

As this implies, the scope is likely to be quite wide. Turning again to Canada, the range of sponsoring arrangements has become quite complex. But drawing on their practice and simplifying for clarity we could envisage in the UK a structure along the following lines:

- **Lead sponsoring organisations** – institutions like national faith bodies, church dioceses, established NGOs which sign agreements with the government department running sponsorship (see below) and which both sponsor some refugees themselves and provide guidance and support to smaller sponsoring groups<sup>11</sup>
- **Community sponsors** – community organisations, local groups etc who maybe only sponsor one refugee family a year and who raise the money and provide the person to person support but who themselves are supported by a lead sponsoring organisation
- **Groups of individuals** – most likely a particular family or collection of families (perhaps with back-up from friends and neighbours) sponsoring a particular refugee or refugee family, probably on a one-off basis, and probably because they are family members or known to them. Again they register with and are supported by a lead sponsoring organisation

At the government level there is likely to be something equivalent to the Canadian Central Processing Office, in Britain's case presumably based at the Home Office. It would be with this office that the Lead Sponsoring Organisations signed agreements and through this office that applications to sponsor would all pass (for community and individual sponsors via the Lead Sponsoring Organisation).

In addition there would probably be a national and regional infrastructure something like the following:

- A Refugee Sponsorship Training programme – Probably funded by the government and operated by Lead Sponsoring Organisations (who would jointly devise the programme) this would provide training and ongoing information on all aspects of private sponsorship through workshops, videos, webinars etc
- A Joint Home Office and Lead Sponsorship Organisation Committee which would be a forum for management and an exchange of information. (Because privately sponsored refugees would be using public services in local authority areas from day one and after 12 months might become eligible for local housing etc relevant local authorities or the LGA would also have to be represented on this body so their views were taken into account)

As is evident from all this, any small group or group of individuals would have access to considerable help in setting up and seeing through their

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<sup>11</sup> In Canada, these are called Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs). More than 70 per cent of such lead groups are churches or church-connected groups, including Mennonite, Christian Reformed, United, Alliance and Presbyterian denominations.

sponsorship arrangements. But of course there are some potential **issues** associated with private sponsorship including:

- **Bureaucratic delays** - private sponsorship can be a slow process as applications are considered and processed. Waits of more than 12 months are not uncommon in countries like Canada
- **Keeping sponsors engaged and enthused** – because of the delays people can lose enthusiasm and become frustrated
- **Keeping costs reasonable** – private sponsorship does involve considerable cost and beyond a certain point potential sponsors are deterred. The model set out above assumes there will be no charge for applications (as in Canada but not in Australia). High charges for visa applications for sponsored refugees could put off many sponsors.
- **Refusals** – private sponsors can be frustrated when their applications to sponsor particular refugees are refused. This tends to happen when groups of individuals apply and because the potential sponsored refugee does not meet the criteria of the government for entry as a refugee. Good information at early stages about who or who might be admitted can mitigate this issue.
- **Breakdown of sponsorships** – The Canadian experience is that this happens very rarely but there can be instances where sponsors cannot follow through on a commitment to support financially and otherwise their sponsored refugees. This is where lead sponsoring organisations step in. In very rare situations, private sponsored refugees have to be transferred into fully government funded programmes.

Finally, there is the issue of: **What happens after the private sponsorship period ends?**

The assumption of private sponsorship in other countries is that after 12 months of support sponsored refugees will be able to support themselves in their new home country through work. Official evaluation in Canada suggests that this is largely what happens<sup>12</sup>. However, in the UK context we would assume that any sponsored refugee who was not able to support themselves after 12 months would be entitled to access the same benefits as other resettled refugees if they needed such support.

In some circumstances, sponsorship arrangements could be extended by mutual agreement between the sponsoring body and the government for longer than 12 months.

In no circumstances other than conviction of a serious crime would a sponsored refugee face deportation from the UK. They would have a 5 year

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/evaluation/psrp/psrp-summary.asp>

humanitarian protection visa and to encouraged to become a citizen of the UK in due course.

Like all forms of refugee protection private sponsorship does not provide a person uprooted by persecution or war with a golden ticket to a new life. But if well run by both government and civil society there are many benefits.

### **Checklist of benefits of private sponsorship**

- Transformative for refugees who enter in this way
- Another way to reunite refugee families
- A way to increase the number and diversify the range of refugees coming to the UK through resettlement (private sponsored refugees may not have to meet such strict criteria for entry as other resettled refugees in terms of vulnerability for instance)
- Huge personal, emotional, spiritual rewards for sponsoring groups and individuals. It is a step up from just giving money or clothes to unnamed refugees or asylum seekers
- Increases positive refugee awareness in communities where privately sponsored refugees settle (In Canada, private sponsoring organisations say sponsorship has had a huge effect on public sympathy for refugees among the Canadian public)

Before turning to what next, we should just consider **possible alternatives to the classic 'full' private sponsorship model**

In Canada, most privately sponsored refugees are 'sponsor referred'. This means that the sponsor approaches the government processing office and says they want to bring in person or family X or Y. We assume that something similar would happen in the UK.

But another alternative is 'visa office referred' sponsorship. This is where the government proposes a refugee who qualifies for resettlement through UNHCR systems to an interested sponsoring group rather than the other way round. If this happened in the UK it might interest groups who want to sponsor a refugee but have no personal contacts with any refugees. Under this system the sponsoring group would still be expected to guarantee all the support costs for 12 months.

Another option now also used in Canada is the so-called 'blended' scheme. It is similar to visa office referred sponsorship but, simply put, involves more splitting of the costs. This could be an attractive option as it potential makes private sponsorship less costly for the sponsoring groups (though it depends on exactly what costs are split) and offers a way for civic society to assist government and local authorities in their resettlement efforts. However, such a scheme would also blur the boundary between private sponsorship arrangements and fully-funded government schemes potentially undermining the principle of additionality.

## Conclusion

This guide has attempted to set out in a reasonably concise and accessible way how private sponsorship might work in the UK in order to encourage people keen who want to help refugees to consider expressing an early interest in taking part. So what might happen next?

- The National Refugee Welcome Board in partnership with others will look to work with the Home Office to develop a private sponsorship scheme for the UK along the lines set out above, in line with principles of additionality and so on, and in such a way that costs and responsibilities falling on potential sponsor groups are not so high that people are put off
- The NRWB will at the same time look to identify and work with organisations capable of taking on 'Lead Sponsorship Organisation' status to encourage them to show interest in this role. If a number can be signed up this will demonstrate to the government that a private sponsorship scheme is viable
- The NRWB will use our various networks to identify and approach groups and individuals – including those who've already indicated a 'desire to help' refugees in practical ways such as offering rooms in their house or fostering children – to see if they would willing to register their early interest in becoming private sponsors
- For those who do register a 'pathway to private sponsorship' could be established involving road show events, on-line and webinar discussions etc

## Additional links

<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/welcoming-engagement-how-private-sponsorship-can-strengthen-refugee-resettlement-european>

<http://policyoptions.irpp.org/2015/09/25/the-private-sponsorship-of-refugees-program-after-alan-kurdi/>

<http://www.rstp.ca/en/resources/videos/overview-webinar-private-sponsors>

<http://ccrweb.ca/en/changes-private-sponsorship-refugees>

<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/pdf/pub/ref-sponsor.pdf>

<http://www.cpj.ca/sites/default/files/docs/files/PrivateSponsorshipandPublicPolicyReport.pdf>

<http://mcccanada.ca/stories/how-sponsor-refugee-family>

<http://mcccanada.ca/sites/mcccanada.ca/files/media/hr/documents/refugeesponsorshipassociate2015.pdf>

<http://mcccanada.ca/sites/mcccanada.ca/files/media/common/documents/responsibilitiesofasponsoringchurchandnewcostofsponsorship.pdf>

<http://www.resettlement.eu/news/focus-syria>

<http://www.immigrationlaw.com.au/document-800492701/new-program-to-sponsor-refugees>

<http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/SHAP%20FAQ%2014-3-2014.pdf/Files/SHAP%20FAQ%2014-3-2014.pdf>

<http://www.unhcr.org/52b2febafc5.pdf>