



# Attracting, Retaining, and Diversifying Sponsors for Refugees in Community Sponsorship Programmes

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## Executive Summary

Over the past decade and a half, the world has witnessed multiple refugee crises, including those resulting from the devastating civil war in Syria that began in 2011, the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021, and the war in Ukraine that began in 2022. These crises have underscored the pressing need to develop innovative solutions and alternative pathways to support displaced populations. This is especially the case as, at present, less than 4 per cent of people displaced across international borders and in need of protection are resettled to a safe third country each year.

In response to recent crises, countries in Europe and elsewhere have begun to explore the potential of sponsorship programmes as another pathway for refugee protection and integration. Sponsorship programmes have existed in Canada for several decades but are relatively new in Europe. It is only in the past eight years that European countries—including Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom—have introduced or piloted their own sponsorship programmes. As of mid-2023, nearly 20 countries worldwide were operating sponsorship initiatives of various kinds. These programmes are seen not only as avenues to expand protection capacity but also as an opportunity to engage receiving-community members more deeply in supporting refugees' settlement and integration and potentially to challenge negative public narratives.

Sponsorship schemes are distinct from traditional refugee resettlement in that they leverage the energy and resources of civil-society actors and private citizens to support the integration of refugees, through a redistribution of certain tasks traditionally handled by a country's resettlement and refugee protection authorities. This is both an asset and a challenge. On one hand, this means sponsorship programmes can tap into new resources and capacity, especially during crises, and ensure that average citizens

'buy into' refugee resettlement. On the other hand, the success of these programmes hinges on persuading private individuals (often called 'sponsors') to donate their time and often some personal resources to support vulnerable newcomers—which can sometimes be a hard sell if community members are themselves experiencing economic precarity or uncertainty about the future.

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Beyond the direct involvement of communities—the defining feature of all sponsorship programmes—the design of these initiatives varies. For example, some programmes allow sponsors to apply to support specific refugee individuals or families (known as 'naming' or 'nominating', and often used to sponsor extended family members), but in many others, sponsors support refugees they do not know (the 'sponsoring strangers' model). In both cases, the programme's sustainability relies on its ability to recruit a high-quality pool of sponsors and ensure they have positive experiences that encourage them to support additional refugees in the future or inspire other community members to participate in the programme.

Original research on sponsorship programmes in Belgium, Germany,<sup>1</sup> and Ireland (all of which follow a ‘sponsoring strangers’ model) has shed new light on the considerable effort it takes to run these programmes and some of the challenges that, to date, have limited the number of refugees admitted via sponsorship channels. Across countries, this study finds that sponsor recruitment and retention are among the primary obstacles to sponsorship programmes’ growth and sustainability.

Factors that can hinder recruitment include:

- ▶ **Limited recruitment networks, strategies, and resources.** Most sponsorship programmes rely heavily on a few (often faith-based) civil-society organisations to lead recruitment efforts. While this approach has yielded a dedicated pool of sponsors, recruiting only within these organisations’ networks has limited sponsor diversity. Broader recruitment campaigns and funding for them are generally lacking.
- ▶ **Extensive requirements for sponsors.** In many programmes, sponsor groups (usually comprised of five or more people) are asked to handle an extensive list of tasks, such as finding and often financing housing for a minimum of one year and providing various kinds of settlement and integration support (e.g., assisting with administrative procedures, supporting the enrolment of children in schools and adults in language courses). The scope of these responsibilities has discouraged some potential participants and shaped the profile of those who do engage, who tend to be older adults with more time and resources.
- ▶ **Cumbersome application procedures.** Sponsorship programmes generally have lengthy application procedures that can be difficult to navigate. While thorough screening is important to protect the well-being of both refugees and sponsors, this process has often meant that some interested individuals do not ultimately become sponsors.
- ▶ **Absence of personalised matching procedures.** Some potential sponsors may be deterred from participating if there is no guarantee that their preferences will be taken into consideration when they are matched with a refugee or where the programme does not permit sponsors to name individual refugees they wish to support.

In terms of retention, the key elements that predict whether sponsors will remain active in the programme after completing their first sponsorship assignment include:

- ▶ **Group dynamics.** Tensions among sponsor group members or the decision by some group members not to repeat the experience can affect individuals’ willingness to continue their involvement.
- ▶ **Expectations and support with difficult tasks.** How prepared sponsors feel and the support they receive (e.g., the availability of tools, guidance, and on-demand support), as well the extent to which

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<sup>1</sup> Report coauthors Nadja Dumann and Florian Tissot are researchers with the Research Centre on Migration, Integration, and Asylum at the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), one of the federal government agencies responsible for the country’s refugee sponsorship programme. The insights and data they shared on the operational workings of that programme have been instrumental in helping to inform this report.

their experiences with the programme met their expectations, can have an impact on their decision to repeat or recommend participation to others.

- ▶ **Local awareness of the sponsorship programme.** Sponsors may encounter additional difficulties when completing administrative tasks, seeking housing, or helping refugees access services for which they are eligible if local authorities and other stakeholders are unfamiliar with the programme.
- ▶ **The option to sponsor refugees' extended family members.** Giving repeat sponsors the chance to name or be matched with extended family members of the first refugee(s) they supported could encourage more to sign up for another round of sponsorship and promote organic growth within the programme. However, most programmes do not offer this option.

External events have also challenged efforts to secure and sustain sponsor engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly delayed refugee arrivals in many countries, leaving sponsor groups waiting for prolonged periods and fuelling frustration. The sudden onset of other displacement crises, including the arrival of millions of Ukrainians in Europe since February 2022, has led some volunteer groups that were initially prepared to sponsor resettled refugees to withdraw their applications and redirected their efforts. For many, supporting Ukrainians was perceived as more urgent and somewhat easier since it involved less extensive commitments, quicker application procedures, and did not require sponsors to wait for arrivals.

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*More tailored recruitment ... and stronger support for sponsors are needed to expand the pool of individuals willing and able to welcome refugees and to scale up sponsorship as a protection pathway.*

More tailored recruitment, rooted in a better understanding of what motivates people to become sponsors, and stronger support for sponsors are needed to expand the pool of individuals willing and able to welcome refugees and to scale up sponsorship as a protection pathway. Drawing on lessons learnt from Belgium, Germany, and Ireland as well as other European countries with sponsorship programmes and Canada, this study identifies three key areas where greater attention would help secure, scale, and diversify sponsor recruitment and retention:

- ▶ **Broadening outreach to attract more (and more diverse) sponsors.** Prioritising and investing in outreach and the identification of new pools of potential sponsors are essential for any community-based programme. This may involve, for example, engaging a wider range of civil-society organisations and local stakeholders in recruitment, working with previous sponsors and sponsored refugees as ambassadors, or having well-known public figures raise awareness about the programme. Additionally, market studies and other evidence-informed strategies can be used to identify key audiences and tailor outreach messages to them.
- ▶ **Reconsidering programme design and support structures to increase sign-ups and retention.** Programmes may wish to examine whether, in order to make sponsorship feasible for more interested individuals, they could limit the scope of the tasks sponsors are responsible for (notably, those related to housing and financial support) and the duration of commitments. They could also rethink matching

procedures to give sponsors a greater voice in the process and consider allowing repeat sponsors to nominate the extended family members of refugees they have already sponsored. Finally, there is a need to improve programme support structures to help sponsors complete difficult tasks and to ensure safeguards are in place to them (and refugees) in unforeseen emergencies.

- ▶ **Enhancing the capacity and preparedness of sponsors and local actors.** This should involve helping sponsors set realistic expectation and prepare for their role, raising awareness among local officials of sponsored refugees' rights and service eligibility, and monitoring programme operations to identify any tensions or gaps in support.

Establishing and running sponsorship programmes can be time and resource intense, but well-managed programmes promise considerable benefits for both refugees and receiving communities. At a time when scarce options to reach safety have left millions of people facing protracted displacement and contributed to irregular border crossings, human trafficking, and lives lost at sea, sponsorship represents a promising tool for expanding legal pathways to protection. And by engaging community members directly in welcoming their new neighbours, sponsorship can give receiving communities more of a say in those pathways and enhance social cohesion. The strategies highlighted in this study can help sponsorship programmes address the recruitment and retention challenges encountered to date and more fully realise the benefits for refugees and their new communities.

## 1 Introduction

In a context of multiple refugee crises and of resettlement programmes facing serious resource and political constraints, less than 4 per cent of people who are in need of protection globally have access to resettlement.<sup>2</sup> Recognising the staggering scale of unmet protection needs as well as the value of involving receiving-community members more directly in supporting refugees, several European countries have introduced resettlement-based and other sponsorship schemes since humanitarian protection issues shot up the political agenda during the 2015–16 migration and refugee crisis.<sup>3</sup> Sponsorship initiatives follow a variety of models (see Box 1) and can act either as a tool to support traditional refugee resettlement (this is, by contributing to national resettlement efforts) or as an additional legal pathway for refugees to gain protection in a country (with those admitted not counting towards traditional resettlement quotas).

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*Several European countries have introduced resettlement-based and other sponsorship schemes since humanitarian protection issues shot up the political agenda during the 2015–16 migration and refugee crisis.*

<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 'Refugee Data Finder', accessed 16 May 2023.

<sup>3</sup> As of mid-2023, sponsorship programmes existed in countries in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere: Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. See Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative, 'What Is Community Sponsorship?', updated 27 June 2022.

**BOX 1****An overview of community sponsorship models**

Sponsorship programmes function as public-private partnerships and are guided by formal agreements or frameworks that establish the roles and responsibilities of each party involved. The distinctive characteristic of community-based sponsorship initiatives, as opposed to traditional government-led refugee resettlement, is that private individuals (with the assistance of civil-society organisations) collaborate with government entities to provide refugees with essential reception, settlement, and integration support. This shift in responsibilities from government to private individuals is a key ingredient in all sponsorship programmes. Beyond that, however, sponsorship programmes have developed different frameworks and structures, each with distinct goals, dynamics, and stakeholder roles. Existing models include:

- ▶ **Resettlement-based sponsorship:** These programmes involve either groups of private individuals (under the auspices of a community organisation) or civil-society organisations (supported by volunteers) taking shared responsibility for the reception and integration of refugees who enter a country through traditional resettlement channels. Because these programmes use resettlement channels, national governments play an active role in the selection of refugees for admission, generally based on referrals from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and often in matching them with a sponsor group. Matching typically follows a ‘sponsor a stranger’ model (this is, sponsors cannot nominate specific refugees they wish to sponsor), but some programmes include input from nongovernmental organisation (NGO) involved in the programme or—less often—from sponsor groups. The government is also usually involved in organising predeparture activities (e.g., orientation, health checks, and travel). By focusing on UNHCR-referred refugees, these programmes tend to admit the most vulnerable refugees and those with specific protection needs. Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Spain, and the United Kingdom have established resettlement-based sponsorship programmes, and one of Canada’s sponsorship programmes (the Blended Visa Office-Referred [BVOR] programme) follows this model. Most recently, Portugal, Finland, and Sweden have introduced pilot programmes of this nature, although the latter two operate more like ‘buddy programmes’, in which sponsors are solely in charge of accompanying refugees as they integrate into the local community without taking on specific commitments.
- ▶ **Named sponsorship or de facto family reunification schemes:** These programmes allow private individuals in a resettlement country to nominate a refugee individual or family who they commit to sponsoring if admitted to the country. Because refugees are often nominated by relatives, these programmes tend to focus more on family reunification than on protection needs alone (in contrast to sponsorship of UNHCR-referred refugees). The Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) programme in Canada is an example of this model, and it operates as a standalone complementary pathway (i.e., admissions are not counted towards the country’s resettlement quota). Programmes of this kind also previously existed in Ireland. Some of Germany’s subnational humanitarian admissions programmes, though not the focus of this study, take this approach as well.
- ▶ **Humanitarian corridors:** These programmes have frequently been established in response to advocacy efforts, often led by faith-based civil-society organisations following specific displacement crises. They are usually formalised in a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between these organisations and the government that outlines the target number of programme beneficiaries, the first countries of asylum from which refugees will be admitted, and the timeline for arrivals. In humanitarian corridor programmes, civil-society actors are not only responsible for coordinating and overseeing the integration of refugees, often with volunteer support, but they are also in charge of coordinating the identification, selection, travel arrangements, and matching of refugees with a host community. The government’s role in this model is generally limited to reviewing and approving applications for the legal entry of sponsored refugees. Beneficiaries of these programmes are generally selected not only based on UNHCR vulnerability criteria but also integration-related factors (e.g., refugees’ receiving-country language skills). Belgium, France, and Italy have implemented humanitarian corridor programmes.

Sources: Jennifer Hyndman, William Payne, and Shauna Jimenez, ‘The State of Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada: Trends, Issues, and Impacts’ (RRN/CRS policy brief submitted to the Government of Canada, York University, December 2016); Susan Fratzke et al., *Refugee Sponsorship Programmes: A Global State of Play and Opportunities for Investment* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2019).



Beyond providing a legal pathway for refugees to enter a safe country, sponsorship programmes are believed to have positive effects on the integration outcomes of new arrivals in at least two ways. Firstly, by directly connecting refugees with a local network, these programmes create a broader and more personalised local support system—one able to provide emotional and psychological support, in addition to help finding employment and completing other tasks—and this community support can lead to integration outcomes that surpass those of refugees supported by government initiatives alone.<sup>4</sup> For instance, studies have shown that sponsored refugees in Canada exhibit better employment and language acquisition outcomes than those who enter through the regular government-led programme.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, by fostering meaningful and enduring relationships between long-time residents and newcomers, sponsorship programmes can enhance public perceptions of refugees and strengthen social cohesion.<sup>6</sup> This direct contact and communities' feelings of ownership over the resettlement process can thus boost public acceptance of refugee newcomers.<sup>7</sup>

Recruiting and retaining sponsors, along with securing adequate funding and housing, have emerged as major challenges for scaling up resettlement-based sponsorship programmes.<sup>8</sup> As private citizens play a vital role in initiating, sustaining, and expanding these programmes, effective recruitment and retention efforts are crucial to programme success and sustainability.<sup>9</sup> To date, most resettlement-based sponsorship programmes have been limited in scale (see Table 1) and have consistently fallen short of their annual admissions targets. For example, Germany anticipated supporting up to 500 sponsored refugees between 2019 and the end of 2021, but as of March 2023, 152 had been admitted to the country.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Belgium set the goal of welcoming up to 100 beneficiaries yearly,<sup>11</sup> but since its sponsorship programme began in 2020, a total of 61 refugees have been sponsored. Achieving programme admissions targets has even been a challenge in Canada, which is known for its substantial sponsorship efforts.<sup>12</sup> The country's Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) programme—one of several sponsorship programmes in Canada, and the one most comparable to 'sponsor a stranger' resettlement-based sponsorship programmes in Europe—has found it difficult to meet its targets since 2018, amidst fading media attention to Syrian refugees (the population the programme was originally created to support), and this has led the government to consider possibly cancelling the programme.<sup>13</sup> Many programmes also face difficulties diversifying the pool of

4 Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, *From Fear to Solidarity: The Difficulty in Shifting Public Narratives about Refugees* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2022).

5 As of mid-2023, there was limited evidence in Europe on the impact of sponsorship programmes. There is, however, anecdotal evidence suggesting that sponsored refugees benefit from greater employment and social integration support. See Nikolas Feith Tan, 'Community Sponsorship in Europe: Taking Stock, Policy Transfer and What the Future Might Hold', *Frontiers in Human Dynamics* 3 (21 April 2021).

6 Banulescu-Bogdan, *From Fear to Solidarity*.

7 Banulescu-Bogdan, *From Fear to Solidarity*.

8 Jenny Phillimore and Marisol Reyes, *Community Sponsorship in the UK: From Application to Integration. Formative Evaluation* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, Institute for Research into Superdiversity, 2019).

9 Susan Fratzke et al., *Refugee Sponsorship Programmes: A Global State of Play and Opportunities for Investment* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2019); Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil), 'Community Sponsorship' (brochure, 2023).

10 Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe) researcher conversation with a representative of BAMF, 2 June 2023.

11 MPI Europe interview with official from Fedasil, 23 April 2021.

12 Canada's reputation in this regard is more closely linked to its sizeable named sponsorship efforts (e.g., via the Private Sponsorship of Refugees programme) than through its resettlement-based sponsorship programme.

13 MPI Europe researcher conversation with a representative of Refugee 613, 18 October 2022.

sponsors beyond the ‘usual suspects’. Sponsors tend to be people within the networks of the civil-society organisations involved these programmes and often with previous volunteering experience.

TABLE 1

**Arrivals via resettlement-based sponsorship programmes in Belgium, Germany, and Ireland, 2019–23**

Country	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 (as of March)	Total (2019–March 2023)
Belgium	-	14	15	22	10	61
Germany	17	18	83	21	13	152
Ireland	26	6	49*	38*	38	157

\* These numbers include Afghans entering Ireland through humanitarian admissions pathways who have benefited from sponsorship. Note: Belgium’s pilot programme began in 2020, hence no data are available for 2019.

Sources: International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) Europe and Share Network, *Resettlement & Community Sponsorship across Europe* (Brussels: ICMC Europe and Share Network, 2023); Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe) researcher conversation with a representative of the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil), 22 May 2023.

With the exception (to some extent) of Canada and the United Kingdom, there is limited data on and understanding of the challenges and opportunities that sponsorship programmes face in diversifying and scaling participation. This study explores these research gaps by analysing what types of people choose to become sponsors, what motivates them to engage and stay engaged, and how programme design elements can affect participation and retention. The analysis is based in part on original fieldwork in Belgium, Ireland, and Germany—chosen for being the three EU countries with the longest-running national resettlement-based sponsorship programmes. This research included a survey<sup>14</sup> developed by Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI Europe) researchers and conducted between December 2022 and February 2023 to collect sociodemographic data on sponsors in Belgium and Ireland and to understand their motivations and challenges, and semistructured interviews conducted by MPI Europe in 2022–23 with 28 individuals (including government officials, civil-society representatives, and sponsors) in 12 countries with sponsorship programmes<sup>15</sup> to explore how programme design, requirements, and outreach can affect sponsor recruitment and retention. The research also draws on the findings of a formative evaluation of the German sponsorship programme conducted by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) and published in June 2023, to which two of this report’s authors contributed.<sup>16</sup> Finally, this study benefitted from insights shared by sponsorship programme stakeholders during workshops organised under the Building Capacity for Private Sponsorship in the European Union (CAPS-EU) Project.<sup>17</sup>

14 The survey was shared with active and former sponsors in Belgium and Ireland, through the intermediary organisations that support sponsors in each country.

15 Interviews were conducted with stakeholders in the following countries: Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The majority of the interviews in Germany were conducted by BAMF researchers as part of an evaluation of the country’s sponsorship programme.

16 The German evaluation utilised data collected between 1 June 2019 and 31 December 2021. See Florian Tissot, Nadja Dumann, and Maria Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ‚Neustart im Team‘: Studie zur Programmumsetzung* (Nuremberg: BAMF Research Centre on Migration, Integration, and Asylum, 2023).

17 The report considers insights shared by stakeholders (including state representatives, intermediary organisations, and sponsors) that participated in a closed-door transnational roundtable entitled ‘Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors for Scaling Sponsorship Programmes in Europe’, organised by the MPI Europe in Dublin, 9 November 2022, and by participants in the MPI Europe webinar ‘Managing Expectations of Sponsors and Refugees in Sponsorship Programmes’, 24 January 2023. Both events were part of the Building Capacity for Private Sponsorship in the European Union (CAPS-EU) project.

This report begins by outlining the different roles and responsibilities of private individuals in sponsorship efforts. It then analyses some of the motivations that lead people to become sponsors, and common recruitment- and retention-related challenges to scaling up and sustaining these programmes. The report then identifies three areas where further investment could facilitate the expansion of recruitment and retention efforts before concluding with future-oriented considerations and recommendations.

## BOX 2

### Key terminology

Each sponsorship programme has its own terminology for the people and organisations involved in the settlement and integration of refugees. To facilitate comparisons across countries, this report utilises the following terms:

- ▶ **Sponsor** to refer to private individuals who volunteer to join a group, typically consisting of five to eight members, that collectively assumes responsibility of providing programme-specific support to sponsored refugees for a specific period of time. This is the term used in Canada and Ireland, while Belgium uses the term ‘hosts’, Germany uses ‘mentors’, and the United Kingdom and Italy use ‘volunteers’ for these individuals.
- ▶ **Intermediary organisation** to refer to civil-society organisations that have a contractual obligation to collaborate with the government within the framework of a sponsorship programme. Their role typically involves recruiting sponsors and assisting them in welcoming, receiving, and supporting the integration of refugees. Belgium uses ‘partner organisation’ for entities that perform this function, while Ireland uses ‘regional support organisation’, and the United Kingdom uses ‘lead sponsor’.
- ▶ **Umbrella or national support organisation** to refer to a consortium of NGOs often tasked with coordinating and overseeing the efforts of intermediary organisations and sometimes involved in sponsor recruitment. For example, in Germany, this role is fulfilled by the Civil Society Contact Point (Zivilgesellschaftliche Kontaktstelle, or ZKS), born out of collaboration between three NGOs to promote the German sponsorship programme. In Ireland, the Open Community fulfils this role through a partnership between the intermediary organisations and international organisations such as Amnesty International and UNHCR.

Sources: ICF and MPI Europe, *Study on the Feasibility and Added Value of Sponsorship Schemes as a Possible Pathway to Safe Channels for Admission to the EU, Including Resettlement* (Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2018); Susan Fratzke, *Engaging Communities in Refugee Protection: The Potential of Private Sponsorship in Europe* (Brussels: MPI Europe, 2017).

## 2 Common Recruitment and Retention Challenges

While many people may be sympathetic to refugees, perhaps even expressing an interest in sponsorship in principle, only a fraction take the additional step of officially becoming sponsors. A 2021 evaluation of an outreach campaign conducted by Reset (a UK charity that supports volunteers working with refugees) revealed that out of every 18 people who expressed an interest in sponsorship, only 1 actually proceeded to become a sponsor.<sup>18</sup> In Germany, the BAMF evaluation of the country’s sponsorship programme in

<sup>18</sup> Reset, ‘Communities for Refugees: Campaign Evaluation’ (fact sheet, 2021).

June 2019–December 2021 found that about half of people who initially showed an interest in the programme ended up participating in it and receiving refugees in their community.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, there is some evidence to suggest that, even when people have a positive sponsorship experience, many choose not to act as a sponsor more than once—at least not immediately. For example, responses to an MPI Europe survey of sponsor groups in Belgium and Ireland suggest that sponsors often need some time off before they would consider sponsoring again, with less than one-third being open to the idea of repeating the sponsoring experiences. Similarly, an evaluation of the Canadian BVOR programme found that less than one-third of BVOR sponsors have sponsored more than one BVOR case.<sup>20</sup>

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The subsections that follow explore challenges that sponsorship programmes frequently encounter in their efforts to build a high-quality pool of sponsors, focusing on those related to outreach and identification of potential sponsors, recruitment processes, and retention.

## A. *Conducting outreach and identifying potential sponsors*

Outreach efforts play a crucial role in influencing the number and diversity of sponsors in a resettlement-based sponsorship programme. Unlike sponsorship programmes focused on family reunification or where sponsors nominate the refugees they wish to support (programmes in which participation is often based on existing family or cultural ties), the success and sustainability of resettlement-based sponsorship programmes rely on convincing private individuals to dedicate their time, effort, and resources to support someone they do not know. However, outreach has not always been given the priority and resources it deserves, and this has limited the visibility and, therefore, sustainability and scalability of some of these programmes.

### **Recruitment, typically done by civil-society organisations, is often limited to their existing networks.**

In most resettlement-based sponsorship programmes, intermediary or umbrella organisations take on responsibility for raising awareness about the programmes and recruiting individuals to participate as sponsors. These organisations have utilised various channels to do so, including social media, newsletters, in-person events (such as information sessions), and occasionally traditional media (TV or radio). Particularly during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, online campaigns played a significant role in outreach strategies.

Relying on well-known and trusted civil-society organisations for recruitment has proven to be a quick and effective method for engaging sponsors. However, this approach has also had some limitations. Outreach

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<sup>19</sup> Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ‚Neustart im Team‘*.

<sup>20</sup> Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), *Evaluation of the Blended Visa Office-Referral (BVOR) Program* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2021).



efforts have often been focused on (or at least, most successful with) the organisations' existing volunteers or followers who live within the geographies they serve, and this has limited the scale and diversity of programme recruitment.<sup>21</sup> For example, the German sponsorship programme, NesT (Neustart im Team, or New Start in a Team),<sup>22</sup> has mainly relied on its umbrella organisation, the ZKS (Zivilgesellschaftliche Kontaktstelle, or Civil Society Contact Point), to recruit participants, leading to a concentration of sponsors in regions where the ZKS is most active—namely, North Rhine-Westphalia and southern Germany.<sup>23</sup> Survey data from Ireland suggest that sponsors may be more evenly spread across the country's regions, likely due in part to the existence of designated intermediary organisations leading outreach efforts in each region.<sup>24</sup> The heavy reliance on intermediary organisations, many of them faith based, for sponsor identification has also meant that many of the people reached via their outreach efforts have a religious background (frequently, Christian) and have previous faith-based volunteering experience.

A more strategic approach to which civil-society organisations and other stakeholders to involve in outreach is still missing in most programmes, and careful consideration of this issue could facilitate the identification of a larger, more diverse pool of sponsors. For instance, evaluations of the Canadian BVOR programme in 2021 and the UK sponsorship programme in 2019 found young adults to be interested in becoming sponsors.<sup>25</sup>

However, the evaluations note that engaging young adults as sponsors may require new outreach strategies, including the involvement of a more diverse set of civil-society organisations (beyond the typical faith-based groups) that are better connected to and able to tap into this demographic.

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*Careful consideration of this issue could facilitate the identification of a larger, more diverse pool of sponsors.*

## **Few countries have run broad public outreach campaigns, and key questions remain about what motivates people to become sponsors.**

To date, there have been few broad outreach campaigns to raise public awareness about resettlement-based sponsorship programmes and to encourage individuals not already affiliated with a service or volunteer network to participate. In addition to limiting the number and diversity of sponsors, this has also left crucial questions unanswered about how best to identify potential sponsors within a country, including where to look to find them (in terms of regions, media and social media platforms, and community networks), what factors motivate people to become sponsors (see Box 3), and what messages are most likely to resonate with potential sponsors.

21 Fratzke et al., *Refugee Sponsorship Programmes*; comments by representatives of intermediary organisations and resettlement-country governments at the CAPS-EU roundtable 'Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors'; Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ,Neustart im Team'*.

22 BAMF, 'Resettlement and the NesT programme', updated 14 February 2023.

23 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ,Neustart im Team'*.

24 Data collected from an MPI Europe survey of sponsors in Ireland, December 2022–February 2023.

25 Phillimore and Reyes, *Community Sponsorship in the UK*; Keith Neuman, *Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada – 2021 Market Study* (Toronto: Environics Institute, 2021).

**BOX 3****What motivates people to participate in resettlement-based sponsorship programmes?**

Gaining insights into what motivates people to sponsor refugees is a crucial part of determining what messages and approaches are most likely to reach and resonate with potential sponsors. Interviews with sponsors and representatives of intermediary organisations in Belgium and Ireland, survey data from these countries plus Germany, and existing literature (mainly from Canada and the United Kingdom) point to the following prominent reasons for sponsors' engagement:

- ▶ **Values.** One of the most-cited motivations for becoming a sponsor is empathy, driven by the desire to alleviate human suffering. In Germany, for example, many members of sponsor groups mentioned they were motivated to engage with the country's NesT programme because of its mission to specifically support vulnerable refugees.
- ▶ **Sense of religious duty.** Religious motivations have played a significant role in inspiring individuals to join sponsorship efforts and support refugees, with this factor noted especially in Germany and Belgium. One interviewee from Belgium, for example, referred to his group's sponsorship as being aligned with their (Catholic) religious duty to assist strangers.
- ▶ **Personal networks.** Personal contacts can also incentivise participation. This can include knowing someone already involved in sponsorship, or receiving an invitation from a friend, colleague, neighbour, or family member to become a sponsor.
- ▶ **Family or national history of migration.** Some sponsors, driven by a sense of reciprocity, cite their family's or country's history of migration as a reason for wanting to assist newcomers. For example, some Irish interviewees mentioned their gratitude for the welcome individual Canadians extended to Irish people in the past, and their desire to provide similar help to refugees in need.
- ▶ **History of civic engagement.** For sponsors with previous volunteering, social work, or community involvement experience, being active in their communities and participating in initiatives that bring people together are important aspects of their lives. The collective nature of the sponsorship experience and support provided by intermediary organisations have helped to secure the commitment of sponsors who appreciate being part of a team and contributing to positive social change.
- ▶ **Personal fulfilment.** Some individuals have found a renewed purpose in life through sponsorship, particularly following personal circumstances such as retirement or illness.

This knowledge could be used to shape compelling, targeted outreach campaigns. However, because these insights come from individuals who have already chosen to participate in sponsorship initiatives based on the limited, in-network outreach that has occurred to date, efforts should also be made to understand what messages may motivate other individuals to become active sponsors.

Sources: Florian Tissot, Nadja Dumann, and Maria Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm, Neustart im Team: Studie zur Programmumsetzung* (Nuremberg: BAMF Research Centre on Migration, Integration, and Asylum, 2023); data collected from an MPI Europe survey of sponsors in Belgium and Ireland, December 2022–February 2023; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Nasc in Ireland, 19 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Home for Home sponsorship group in Ireland, 19 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Naas sponsorship group in Ireland, 21 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Lismore sponsorship group in Ireland, 14 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of a sponsorship group in Beloeil Bernissart, Belgium, 11 November 2022; Audrey Macklin et al., 'A Preliminary Investigation into Private Refugee Sponsors', *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018): 35–58; Fratzke, *Engaging Communities in Refugee Protection*; Jenny Phillimore and Marisol Reyes, *Community Sponsorship in the UK: From Application to Integration. Formative Evaluation* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, Institute for Research into Superdiversity, 2019); Luann Good Gingrich and Thea Enns, 'Reflexive View of Refugee Integration and Inclusion: A Case Study of the Mennonite Central Committee and the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program', *Refuge* 35, no. 2 (2019): 9–23.

In some cases, the reluctance to initiate comprehensive outreach campaigns may be attributed to concerns about public narratives surrounding refugees (e.g., where resettlement is a politically divisive topic). In other cases, limited funding, time, and understanding of the importance of such efforts contribute to the absence of strategic outreach. Furthermore, the scarcity of evidence on when, how, and why outreach to different target groups does or does not have the intended impact has made organising more comprehensive outreach difficult.

## ***B. Designing programme requirements and processes that encourage participation***

Resettlement-based sponsorship programmes vary—both from each other and other sponsorship efforts—in terms of what aspects of reception and integration support they expect sponsors to provide refugees, as well as the duration for which sponsors must commit to providing such assistance (see the Appendix for a breakdown of sponsors’ responsibilities in different programmes).

Specific programme design features, including lengthy application and preparation procedures, extensive lists of tasks sponsors are expected to take on, and the absence of an option for sponsors to name or have a say in who they will support, have often posed challenges in securing private individuals’ participation. Additionally, contextual changes such as pandemic-related delays in refugee arrivals and the emergence of less cumbersome hosting opportunities in response to displacement from Ukraine have affected the willingness of potential sponsors to commit to the role.<sup>26</sup>

### **Extensive requirements limit the pool of potential sponsors and create a gap between individuals interested in sponsoring and those willing and able to commit.**

Many programmes require sponsors to take on extensive responsibilities for an extended period (see Box 4), especially in relation to sourcing and financing housing and providing settlement support. These requirements have significantly affected the scale of engagement in sponsorship efforts. For example, in Belgium, Germany, and Ireland, individuals who are recruited as sponsors often express concerns about finding suitable and affordable accommodations in an already-stretched housing market and about being able to cover refugees’ housing and other costs upon arrival.<sup>27</sup>

26 In Germany, for example, there was a sharp drop in the number of expressions of interest in sponsoring after pandemic-imposed delays in refugee arrivals. See Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ‚Neustart im Team‘*.

27 MPI Europe interview with a representative of Nasc in Ireland, 19 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Home for Home sponsorship group in Ireland, 19 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Naas sponsorship group in Ireland, 21 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Lismore sponsorship group in Ireland, 14 October 2022; data collected from an MPI Europe survey of sponsors in Belgium and Ireland, December 2022–February 2023; Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ‚Neustart im Team‘*; Audrey Macklin et al., ‘A Preliminary Investigation into Private Refugee Sponsors’, *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018): 35–58.

These programmes' extensive requirements have also helped shape the profile of people who commit to being sponsors. The requirements, and particularly those related to housing and financial support, have somewhat restricted participation to individuals who: (i) have sufficient time to engage in housing search and fundraising efforts, (ii) are in a better economic position and can offer housing of their own (e.g., a second house) and take responsibility for some expenses, and/or (iii) are connected to churches or other organisations, often faith based, that can facilitate access to housing and funds.<sup>28</sup>

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*These programmes' extensive requirements have also helped shape the profile of people who commit to being sponsors.*

Although comprehensive, granular data on the sociodemographic profile of sponsors are not available for many programmes, surveys conducted in Belgium, Germany, and Ireland along with existing research and data from Canada and the United Kingdom shed some light on the characteristics of the 'average' sponsor.<sup>29</sup> These sources suggest that sponsors have a relatively uniform profile, both within and across countries. In particular, existing data point to sponsors generally being well-educated, women, and around 60 years old. They also tend to have a stable (often, average) income, though some are retired or semi-retired.

The demanding and long-term nature of sponsorship commitments—typically ranging from 12 to 24 months, though engagement often lasts longer<sup>30</sup>—has made participation challenging for some individuals with full-time jobs and other responsibilities, including caring for children. Younger workers and students who may be unsure whether they will be living in the same place and how economically stable they will be throughout the entire sponsorship period may also be unsure about their ability to meet programme requirements.<sup>31</sup> For example, the MPI Europe survey revealed that in Ireland, while some younger adults (under age 44) have participated in the programme, this is often as part of groups led by older sponsors said to have more time to handle certain sponsorship tasks.<sup>32</sup>

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28 Sponsor groups in Germany, for example, are rarely able to accumulate sufficient private resources to fulfil the programme requirements, so many seek support from nonprofit organisations with access to housing (typically, local churches) or local governments willing to allocate social housing for sponsored refugees. See Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm, Neustart im Team!*

29 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm, Neustart im Team!*; Phillimore and Reyes, *Community Sponsorship in the UK*; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Caritas Belgium, 10 October 2022; data collected from an MPI Europe survey of sponsors in Belgium and Ireland, December 2022–February 2023; MPI Europe interview with a representative of the Fédération de l'Entraide Protestante (FEP) in France, 2 June 2023; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Nasc in Ireland, 19 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with representatives of Naas sponsor group in Ireland, 21 October 2022; Macklin et al., 'A Preliminary Investigation into Private Refugee Sponsors'; Neuman, *Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada*.

30 Sponsors in Belgium, Canada, and Germany are expected to support refugees' housing and integration for 12 months. In Ireland, the time commitment is 18 months for integration support and 24 months for housing (similar to the requirements in the United Kingdom). In practice, integration support often continues beyond this period.

31 In Germany, for example, forming a group has taken (on average) seven months, and then it has taken several more months for the sponsored refugees to arrive. This means participants must know they will have the capacity to engage in sponsorship for about two years from the moment they show interest until the end of required 12-month support period. Because young people frequently change jobs and may move cities or even countries, it is difficult for many to commit to sponsorship. See Florian Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm, Neustart im Team!*

32 Data collected from an MPI Europe survey of sponsors in Ireland, December 2022–February 2023.



**BOX 4****The varied requirements of resettlement-based sponsorship programmes**

Resettlement-based sponsorship programmes typically require sponsors to support refugees' social and other forms of integration, including by tapping into their own private resources. However, the exact nature and extent of sponsors' responsibilities vary across countries, mainly around three key areas:

- ▶ **Providing financial support.** Sponsors' financial obligations vary significantly across programmes. In Sweden and Finland, sponsors have no financial responsibility at all. In Germany, sponsors must pay for refugees' net rent, but the country's welfare system covers additional housing expenses as well as a social allowance. In Belgium, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, sponsors are fully responsible for paying for refugees' housing and must also support other initial expenses until the refugees can access social payments from the government. And in Canada's BVOR programme, responsibility for covering sponsored refugees' living costs (rent, food, and utilities) is equally shared between sponsors and the government (six months each), but sponsors are also responsible for covering any other initial needs upon refugees' arrival (e.g., furniture or clothing).
- ▶ **Finding housing.** One of the significant advantages of sponsorship initiatives, especially in countries experiencing housing shortages, is the possibility of accessing private housing for sponsored refugees, instead of solely depending on government-provided accommodations in reception centres or social housing. Still, the approach to housing varies across programmes. For instance, in some programmes (e.g., Sweden and Finland), sponsors are not responsible in any way for refugees' housing. In others (e.g., Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Ireland), programmes set various housing-related requirements for sponsors. First, each scheme outlines criteria for what qualifies as acceptable housing, which can affect the level of difficulty sponsors may encounter when securing accommodations. Examples of such criteria include the requirement that refugees' housing have an independent entrance rather than being a non-private segment of a larger residence (Belgium, Germany, Ireland); that it comply with the terms of social housing to ensure refugees can stay permanently (Germany); and that its rent fall within a specific price range, in line with social payments (Belgium). Second, programmes specify the length of time for which sponsors must secure initial housing, generally ranging from one year (Belgium, Ireland, Germany) to two years (Ireland, United Kingdom). After this period, sponsors in some countries (e.g., Belgium and Ireland) are required to assist refugees in searching for their own accommodations in the private market.
- ▶ **Helping refugees access integration services and complete administrative tasks.** In Belgium, Germany, and Ireland, sponsors are typically responsible for supporting refugees with complex administrative tasks, such as helping them obtain their residence permits and access social security payments and subsidies for which they qualify. Sponsors are also meant to aid refugees in accessing government-provided services that will support their integration, including helping them enrol in educational opportunities and language and job training courses. Sponsors provide this support for different lengths of time, typically ranging from one year (Belgium, Canada, Germany) to a year and a half (Ireland, Spain).

Note: For a breakdown of sponsor responsibilities by country, see the Appendix.

Sources: ICF and MPI Europe, *Study on the Feasibility and Added Value of Sponsorship Schemes*; Fratzke, *Engaging Communities in Refugee Protection*; ICMC Europe and Share Network, *Resettlement & Community Sponsorship across Europe*; Danderyd Municipality, 'Engagera dig volontärt och bli Välkomstguide', updated 27 April 2023; MPI Europe interview with a representative of the Finnish Red Cross, 16 March 2023; Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm, Neustart im Team*.

## Cumbersome application processes can deter even those willing and able to commit.

The long list of tasks most programmes require sponsors to take on has been somewhat necessarily accompanied by careful, yet often lengthy, application processes, even where eligibility criteria are flexible (see Box 5). Most sponsorship programmes require interested private citizens to form groups (typically, five to eight individuals), partner with an intermediary organisation, and develop a support plan for sponsored refugees.<sup>33</sup> Before submitting an application, potential sponsors generally have to attend an information session or trainings (typically covering what sponsorship entails, intercultural differences, and what procedural safeguards are in place to protect both refugees and sponsors) to ensure they understand the programme and their responsibilities. After submitting an application, sponsor groups undergo background checks and vetting to be approved for participation.<sup>34</sup>

Navigating the application process can be confusing and difficult, and interested individuals often need support from intermediary organisations to successfully complete the process.<sup>35</sup> Forming a sponsor group and accomplishing all of the steps in the application process also frequently take a long time, which may deter participation. It may be months between an interested individual's first interaction with an intermediary organisation and the moment their sponsor group welcomes a refugee into their community. For example, in Germany, it takes on average nine months between sponsors' first contact with the ZKS and confirmation from BAMF that their sponsor group is eligible for the programme.<sup>36</sup> Once they have been approved, sponsor groups need to wait for refugees to arrive, at times even after they have secured and started paying for housing.

Complex applications, long procedures, and uncertain timelines can result in frustration and lead some interested individuals to question the meaningfulness of the programme, or even drop out. Changing personal circumstances and external events can also have an impact on engagement. For example, the sudden large-scale arrival of Ukrainians in certain European countries prompted some already-formed sponsor groups to step back from resettlement-based sponsorship initiatives and support Ukrainians instead, as this was perceived as more urgent and easier to do than completing the application process for traditional sponsorship programmes.<sup>37</sup>

33 Applications typically require group members to summarise their experience, language skills, and expectations. The application allows groups to formally express interest in sponsoring a family and show they are able to perform the tasks required by each programme (e.g., by providing proof of financial stability or fundraising efforts, and secured housing for the relevant time period). In Germany, for example, a group's support plan must include details on how they plan to help refugees become familiar and engage with their new local community and gain access to health care, German language courses, training and work opportunities, and school and child care. See Neustart im Team, 'Neustart im Team (NesT)', accessed 16 May 2023.

34 The vetting is typically done by intermediary organisations based on sponsors' settlement plans, motivations, relevant experience, and professional activities.

35 Having intermediary organisations answer potential sponsor groups' questions, discuss doubts, and encourage their interest in applying has proven to be a necessary part of recruitment efforts. See Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm 'Neustart im Team'*.

36 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm 'Neustart im Team'*.

37 For example, vetting procedures for Ukraine response initiatives were generally significantly simpler, and there was no need to wait for arrivals. MPI Europe researcher conversation with a representative of Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) in Belgium, 19 October 2022.

**BOX 5****Who can become a sponsor?**

Resettlement-based sponsorship programmes typically have few eligibility criteria focused on applicants' personal characteristics, rather than their ability to complete the tasks involved in sponsorship. Individual requirements for participation are often limited to being age 18 or older, not having committed a serious crime, and being a citizen or permanent resident of the refugee-receiving country. Previous volunteering experience may be desired, but is not mandatory, in some cases (e.g., Belgium).

In addition to these individual-focused criteria, all resettlement-based sponsorship programmes require interested individuals to form a group of a specific size (typically ranging from 4 to 12 members, depending on the country). Where applicable, the group must provide proof of sufficient collective funds (e.g., Ireland) and of having identified adequate housing and settlement support. Some sponsorship programmes suggest that group members divide tasks and allocate the workload in a clear and efficient manner to promote teamwork, but this is rarely a formal requirement.

Sources: MPI Europe interview with a representative of Caritas Belgium, 10 October 2022; Irish Department of Justice and Equality, 'Community Sponsorship Ireland: A Guide for Prospective Sponsor' (guidance document, Irish Department of Justice and Equality, Dublin, accessed 22 May 2023); Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm „Neustart im Team“*; Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, 'Group Eligibility', accessed 13 July 2023; Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI), *Building Blocks of Community Sponsorship* (N.p.: GRSI, 2022).

## The absence of personalised matching and additionality in many programmes may limit incentives to participate.

Beyond individuals' initial motivations for considering refugee sponsorship (see Box 3 above in Section 2.A.) and the commitments involved, certain elements of a sponsorship programme's design can affect how willing potential sponsors are to commit their time and resources to the programme. Chief among these are how sponsors are paired with refugees and whether the refugees supported via the programme count towards or are admitted in addition to the national resettlement quota.

Existing resettlement-based sponsorship programmes typically operate under a 'matching' system wherein sponsors have little say in who they support (see the Appendix). Instead, sponsors are matched with a refugee family or individual by the government, often in collaboration with an intermediary organisation, based on factors such as family size, any special needs (e.g., health conditions), and the available housing identified by the sponsor group.<sup>38</sup> The prevalent use of a 'sponsor a stranger' approach and the reliance on matching rather than naming processes in resettlement-based sponsorship programmes reflects the goal of prioritising the admission of vulnerable refugees, typically referred by UNHCR, and preventing programmes from becoming de facto channels for family reunification. In practice, current matching mechanisms have meant that sponsor preferences—for example, to sponsor someone with whom they share a common language or who has a certain national, ethnic, or religious background—may not always be accommodated or considered.

38 In most programmes, matching is done using information from the refugee selection process (e.g., information on their specific needs and vulnerabilities) and documents provided by potential sponsors during the application process (e.g., sponsorship plans, housing information).

These programmes' lack of a naming option or personalised matching mechanism has, in some cases, kept potential sponsors from committing to join. This can be due to the perception that they have little ownership over the process, fears that they may feel less connected to refugees with whom they have little in common, and/or limited motivation to invest their time and resources in supporting someone they do not know.<sup>39</sup> For example, in Canada, the use of a naming versus matching component is a key difference between the country's sponsorship programmes and has had an impact on programme performance.

While the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) programme, which allows naming, has seen consistent success in engaging diaspora communities since its creation in 1978, the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) resettlement-based sponsorship programme introduced in 2013, which follows a matching system, has struggled since 2018 to meet its targets due to the limited number of sponsors in the programme.<sup>40</sup>

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*In Canada, the use of a naming versus matching component is a key difference between the country's sponsorship programmes and has had an impact on programme performance.*

A second programme design feature that can shape participation is additionality—that is, whether refugees admitted via the resettlement-based sponsorship programme go beyond existing government-led resettlement efforts and quotas, as opposed to counting towards them.<sup>41</sup> In general, sponsorship programmes in which refugee admissions are additional to traditional resettlement (e.g., Canada, France, Germany, and Italy) have been able to make this an important selling point, highlighting to potential sponsors how their involvement will directly contribute to expanding protection pathways for refugees.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, in countries where sponsorship efforts are counted within the government's resettlement stream (e.g., Belgium, Ireland, and Spain), this extra motivating element is not present.<sup>43</sup>

### C. *Retaining sponsors*

The sustainability of resettlement-based sponsorship programmes heavily relies on their ability to not only attract but also retain sponsors. This means that, in addition to capitalising on sponsors' initial motivations to participate and ensuring they have a positive first sponsorship experience, programmes must think carefully about how to encourage sponsors' ongoing engagement and perhaps even recruitment of others,

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39 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ,Neustart im Team'*; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Home from Home sponsorship group in Ireland, 19 October 2022.

40 In Canada, data from the country's different sponsorship programmes show that family groups supporting refugee family members are the most active type of sponsor groups, a finding attributed to the fact that they are allowed to select the refugees they wish to support through the programme's naming process. MPI Europe interview with a representative of Refugee 613, 18 October 2022.

41 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ,Neustart im Team'*; Marisol Reyes-Soto, 'Recruiting, Developing, and Sustaining Sponsor Groups' (knowledge brief, University of Ottawa Refugee Hub, Ottawa, March 2022).

42 Susan Fratzke, *Engaging Communities in Refugee Protection: The Potential of Private Sponsorship in Europe* (Brussels: MPI Europe, 2017).

43 MPI Europe interview with a representative of Nasc in Ireland, 19 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Caritas Belgium, 10 October 2022; comments by representatives of intermediary organisations and resettlement-country governments at the CAPS-EU roundtable 'Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors'.



such as their friends, family, or neighbours.<sup>44</sup> Participants in sponsorship programmes generally agree that witnessing the integration and safety of refugees in their communities makes their efforts worthwhile.<sup>45</sup> However, while some sponsors express a willingness to welcome another family after their first experience, others may not be inclined to do so immediately or at all.<sup>46</sup> For example, when asked about participating in the Irish programme again, one respondent to the MPI Europe sponsor survey commented:

*“Knowing the time commitment, not so sure I’d be ready at this stage to get involved in another welcome of a family, but my energy could be replenished in a while, and I might reconsider it again. It is a good bit of work in fairness and it’s a bit of an emotional journey too.”<sup>47</sup>*

A variety of factors can influence sponsors’ decisions about whether to continue their engagement beyond their first experience and to recommend the programme to others. These include sponsors’ relationships with other group members, their expectations for the programme, whether it is possible to support extended family members of the refugees they first sponsored, and changes in personal or external circumstances.

### **Difficult group dynamics or a decision by some group members not to repeat the experience can deter others from sponsoring again.**

The relationship between members of a sponsor group is often a defining element of sponsors’ experience participating in the programme and, therefore, their willingness to repeat or recommend it. Coordinating the completion of sponsorship tasks can at times give rise to tensions and disagreements among group members, who may not have known each other before signing up to the sponsorship initiative. An uneven division of labour or different approaches to a problem can affect group members’ overall sponsorship experience. A bad experience, in turn, may lead individuals to withdraw from the programme early or decide not to repeat the experience.

In addition, even if a group works well together, the decision by one member not to repeat the experience can have an impact on other group members’ retention. Survey responses from Belgium and Ireland indicate that individual sponsors are more inclined to participate in another round of sponsorship when the dynamics within the group are positive and when other group members are also willing to repeat the experience together.<sup>48</sup>

### **Unmet expectations and perceptions of inadequate preparedness and support can lead to sponsor burnout.**

Sponsor burnout and feelings of frustration have emerged as common issues across programmes. Often, this is due to unforeseen practical obstacles and to sponsors feeling like they have received insufficient

44 Jenny Phillimore, Marisol Reyes-Soto, Gabriella D’Avino, and Natasha Nicholls, “I Have Felt so Much Joy”: The Role of Emotions in Community Sponsorship of Refugees, *Voluntas* 33, no. 386–396 (2022); Jennifer Hyndman et al., ‘Sustaining the Private Sponsorship of Resettled Refugees in Canada’, *Frontiers in Human Dynamics* 3 (2021).

45 Data collected from an MPI Europe survey of sponsors in Belgium and Ireland, December 2022–February 2023.

46 Data collected from an MPI Europe survey of sponsors in Belgium and Ireland, December 2022–February 2023.

47 Data collected from an MPI Europe survey of sponsors in Ireland, December 2022–February 2023.

48 Data collected from an MPI Europe survey of sponsors in Belgium and Ireland, December 2022–February 2023.

training and support in navigating complex systems and completing difficult tasks, such as securing housing, supporting refugees with administrative procedures, and helping them transition out of the programme.<sup>49</sup> Unrealistic expectations have also led to frustrations and tensions within sponsor groups or between sponsors and refugees, ultimately affecting group dynamics and retention rates.

The intermediary organisations that play a prominent role in overseeing sponsors' work in resettlement-based sponsorship programmes have employed various tools and practices to help both refugees and sponsors set realistic expectations, including pre-arrival calls, information sessions, post-arrival trainings, and ongoing support. However, gaps often remain.

Addressing these proactively is critical to ensuring that sponsors have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, and realistic expectations regarding the time and effort required to build trust with sponsored refugees and support their settlement and integration into the local community.<sup>50</sup>

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*Unrealistic expectations have also led to frustrations and tensions within sponsor groups or between sponsors and refugees, ultimately affecting group dynamics and retention rates.*

In Germany, for example, expectation management remains a challenge, especially when it comes to building understanding of the selection criteria for refugees and addressing questions about whether refugees coming to Germany through the programme really are vulnerable and in need of protection.<sup>51</sup> In Belgium, meanwhile, some sponsors have reported mismatches between what they expected would be the timeline for refugees' integration and the actual time it takes, while others have reported having unrealistic expectations about the effort required to build trust with refugees or not fully understanding the vulnerability criteria used to select refugees for the programme.<sup>52</sup> And in Ireland, some sponsors have said they felt ill-prepared to support refugees throughout the process and expected to receive more guidance during refugees' transition out of the sponsorship programme, and that this had an impact on their decision about whether to repeat the experience.<sup>53</sup>

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49 Data collected from an MPI Europe survey of sponsors in Belgium and Ireland, December 2022–February 2023; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Nasc in Ireland, 19 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Caritas Belgium, 10 October 2022; comments by a representative of an intermediary organisation at the CAPS-EU roundtable 'Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors'.

50 Comments by a representative of an intermediary organisation at the CAPS-EU roundtable 'Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors'; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Refugee 613, 18 October 2022.

51 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ,Neustart im Team'*.

52 MPI Europe interview with a representative of Caritas Belgium, 10 October 2022.

53 In Ireland, many sponsor groups complained about the limited guidance they received at the exit stage of the programme and the fact that, shortly after the refugee families arrived, the sponsors had to start thinking about housing again to make sure the families would have an affordable place to stay when the programme came to an end. MPI Europe interview with a representative of Home from Home sponsorship group in Ireland, 19 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Naas sponsorship group in Ireland, 21 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Lismore sponsorship group in Ireland, 14 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Nasc in Ireland, 19 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Fáilte Bayside Community Sponsorship Group in Ireland, 27 October 2022.

When sponsors feel overwhelmed, like they are not receiving needed support, or that sponsorship is not what they thought it would be, this can have an impact not only on their retention but also on future recruitment efforts if such experiences give the programme a bad reputation.<sup>54</sup>

### **Limited awareness of refugee sponsorship among local actors can unnecessarily add to the burden on sponsors and create frustration.**

Sponsors' ability to effectively fulfil their roles and responsibilities as well as their overall experience and decisions about whether to repeat it or, at least, recommend it to others are also shaped by circumstances beyond the programme itself. A key factor in this regard is awareness among relevant local stakeholders of the sponsorship programme and refugee-related issues more broadly.<sup>55</sup>

In Belgium and Ireland, for example, sponsors have expressed frustration with the process of finding affordable and suitable accommodations for refugees, not only due to difficulties locating suitable properties or navigating housing regulations but also to discrimination from landlords who are often reluctant to rent to refugees and may not fully understand that refugees have access to welfare payments and are able to pay for their own housing.<sup>56</sup>

Limited awareness and understanding of resettlement-based sponsorship at the local administrative level have also imposed challenges on sponsors. For example, some report having to spend substantial time and effort educating local authorities and service providers about the nature of the programme, the rights of participating refugees, and local authorities' responsibilities to ensure refugees can obtain necessary documents (such as residence permits) or access social support payments in a timely manner.<sup>57</sup>

### **Matching outcomes and procedures can have a huge impact on retention.**

Finally, evidence suggest that sponsor retention (like recruitment) is influenced by a programme's mechanism for matching sponsors with refugees. When little consideration is given to making suitable matches, sponsors may find themselves overwhelmed and be unwilling to take on the role again.

There is some evidence to suggest that being able to name or be matched with the extended family members of a group's first refugee match can encourage a person to become a repeat sponsor. In Canada, for example, the 'echo effect' that occurs when private individuals decide to continue their participation in sponsorship by supporting extended family members of the first family they welcomed has been identified as a crucial element in ensuring the long-term viability of the PSR programme.<sup>58</sup> However, this is

54 Comments by a representative of a community group at the CAPS-EU roundtable 'Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors'; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Home from Home sponsorship group in Ireland, 19 October 2022.

55 MPI Europe interview with a representative of Nasc in Ireland, 19 October 2022; comments by a representative of an intermediary organisation at the CAPS-EU roundtable 'Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors'; IRCC, *Evaluation of the BVOR Program*.

56 Data collected from an MPI Europe survey of sponsors in Belgium and Ireland, December 2022–February 2023; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Home from Home sponsorship group in Ireland, 19 October 2022.

57 Comments by representatives of intermediary organisations at the CAPS-EU roundtable 'Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors'; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Home from Home sponsorship group in Ireland, 19 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Naas sponsorship group in Ireland, 21 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Lismore sponsorship group in Ireland, 14 October 2022.

58 IRCC, *Evaluation of the BVOR Program*.

not an option in most resettlement-based sponsorship programmes, meaning this incentive for sustained participation is typically not present.

### 3 Three Pillars for Securing, Scaling, and Diversifying Recruitment and Retention

Growing the pool of sponsors engaged in welcoming refugees into their communities remains—together with funding and housing—one of the biggest challenges to the sustainability and scalability of most resettlement-based sponsorship programmes. However, further innovation and investment around three pillars could help enhance recruitment and retention: strengthening outreach and awareness-raising efforts to support the identification of new potential sponsors, reconsidering certain programme design elements to make participation more feasible for interested individuals, and rethinking how programmes support their sponsors to facilitate retention. This section highlights both promising strategies and examples of how some resettlement-based and other sponsorship programmes are working to address challenges in these areas.

#### A. *Invest in outreach and activities to reach new audiences*

Investing in targeted outreach campaigns, including efforts to diversify the communication channels used and outreach partners involved, can help sponsorship programmes reach a wider audience. A handful of resettlement-based sponsorship programmes around the world (including those in Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom) have in the last few years begun to take a more strategic approach to outreach, heavily investing in the identification of key audiences, awareness-raising, and recruitment campaigns. By engaging in large-scale door-to-door recruitment, hiring professional public relations companies, or analysing the profiles of potential sponsors and targeting outreach accordingly, some programmes have begun to treat outreach (and funding for it) as an essential element of success.

*Some programmes have begun to treat outreach (and funding for it) as an essential element of success.*

#### Diversifying messengers and outreach activities

Word-of-mouth and personal invitations from trusted organisations or individuals have proven to be the most effective methods for engaging community members in sponsorship schemes. Expanding and diversifying the number of intermediary organisations involved in outreach can help scale, diversify, and sustain programmes by effectively tapping into new networks of potential sponsors.<sup>59</sup>

- ▶ **Involving intermediary organisations of diverse background.** Expanding the roster of organisations engaged in outreach, beyond the faith-based networks that have to date played the leading role, can facilitate the inclusion of new, more diverse groups of sponsors. In Canada and

<sup>59</sup> Macklin et al., 'A Preliminary Investigation into Private Refugee Sponsors'; Reyes-Soto, 'Recruiting, Developing, and Sustaining Sponsor Groups'.

the United Kingdom, efforts have been made to involve a wider range of civil-society organisations, whose networks include interested individuals from the LGBTQI+, HIV+, and diaspora communities, among others.<sup>60</sup> And in Germany, the ZKS has been trying to connect with other volunteering initiatives to reach new audiences not yet involved in refugee support.<sup>61</sup> In general, understanding what audiences are most promising for sponsor recruitment can help guide decision-making around which organisations to involve in outreach. For instance, as interest in sponsorship is identified within new segments of the population (e.g., younger adults in Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom), sponsorship programmes should consider engaging with community organisations whose networks include the target audience.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, programme goals can help guide the selection of suitable organisations to engage as partners in outreach.<sup>63</sup> For example, if fostering empathy within local communities is the goal, a sponsorship programme may wish to partner with community organisations whose members have thus far had limited involvement with or exposure to refugees. Similarly, a programme that aims to support specific groups of refugees may wish to partner with diaspora or cultural organisations to reach potential sponsors interested in assisting those groups.

- ▶ **Ensuring broad geographic coverage of intermediary organisations.** Broadening the geographic scope of outreach is an important goal for many sponsorship initiatives. Evidence from France, Germany, and Ireland indicates the significant role intermediary organisations can play in this regard; where these organisations have a presence not only shapes where the most first-time sponsors are brought into the programme, but also how this can lead to the building of regional clusters or networks of sponsors that promote further recruitment via a snowball effect involving person-to-person referrals and a growing sense of community through sponsorship.<sup>64</sup> In Germany, for instance, the BAMF evaluation of the sponsorship programme highlighted the importance of building regional clusters to enhance support, knowledge sharing, and peer learning among programme participants and civil-society organisations, making the programme more attractive for new sponsors.<sup>65</sup> And in France, five regional platforms were introduced by one of the intermediary organisations involved in the programme (the Fédération de l'Entraide Protestante, or FEP) to give more visibility to the programme and better support sponsors in the designated areas.<sup>66</sup> Identifying and involving organisations with a presence in previously under-represented parts of a country could also help broaden programme outreach.

60 MPI Europe interview with a representative of Reset in the United Kingdom, 13 September 2022; Neuman, *Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada*; MPI Europe researcher conversation with a representative of Refugee 613, 18 October 2022.

61 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ‚Neustart im Team‘*.

62 MPI Europe interview with a representative of Reset in the United Kingdom, 13 September 2022; Neuman, *Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada*.

63 For example, if the goal of the programme is to increase awareness of and support for resettlement, one would expect recruitment efforts to seek to engage communities that currently have little interaction with refugees. However, programme goals have often not informed the way sponsorship programmes conduct outreach or target specific populations.

64 See, for example, Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ‚Neustart im Team‘*.

65 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ‚Neustart im Team‘*.

66 FEP, *Evaluation of a Private Sponsorship Programme, Three Years On* (Paris: FEP, 2021); MPI Europe interview with a representative of FEP in France, 2 June 2023.



In addition to working with civil-society organisations, it is important for sponsorship programmes to also identify relevant local actors and communal spaces that can build public awareness of these programmes and opportunities to participate.

- ▶ **Identifying local actors and spaces.** Such spaces can be used not only to engage with traditional target audiences but also to reach new ones that may otherwise be unaware of sponsorship opportunities. For instance, in the United Kingdom, numerous primary schools have been involved in raising awareness among local families about refugees and sponsorship, and this has helped lay the foundation for sponsor recruitment efforts. In addition, some primary schools have helped connect local families with sponsorship opportunities and provided support for fundraising efforts.<sup>67</sup> Corporate networks and businesses, sport clubs, and local authorities can also play a role in spreading the word about sponsorship programmes and tapping into support from new segments of the population.
- ▶ **Engaging community leaders as champions and previous sponsors and refugees as ambassadors for the programme.** Sponsorship programmes can greatly benefit from involving previous sponsors, sponsored refugees, and individuals with strong community networks in their outreach efforts. Information about resettlement-based sponsorship shared by influential community members and firsthand experiences shared by programme participants can help build public interest and secure engagement. For instance, the French humanitarian corridor sponsorship initiative was able to expand its initially largely faith-based pool of sponsors and scale up the programme thanks to the active role of sponsors as ambassadors who would reach out to their personal connections to encourage them to volunteer.<sup>68</sup> This strategy, however, largely depends on a programme's ability to guarantee that sponsors have a positive experience that would make them want to convince others to participate. One recent example of a community-based sensitisation campaign is ComuniTeas, which was launched in the United Kingdom in 2023 to increase the number of sponsors through social connections. The campaign revolves around hosting regional 'tea parties' in four major cities (London, Manchester, Cardiff, and Edinburgh), where community members can gather and learn about sponsorship in a relaxed and inviting atmosphere.<sup>69</sup> The tea parties will be organised by a community member eager to raise awareness about sponsorship and aim to bring together host-community members, individuals with lived experience (e.g., previous sponsors or sponsored refugees), and key local stakeholders, including politicians and local authorities. By sharing firsthand experiences with sponsorship, such outreach efforts can help underscore for potential sponsors the value and positive impact of these initiatives.
- ▶ **Working with public figures to raise awareness of sponsorship opportunities.** Collaborating with reputable and well-known personalities and public figures can help raise awareness beyond the networks of existing programme participants and local organisations. For instance, radio campaigns have been conducted in the United Kingdom and, more recently, in Ireland to expand the pool of sponsors.<sup>70</sup> The 2023 Irish radio campaign led by the Open Community (the national support organisation for the country's sponsorship programme) utilised national radio stations and featured

67 Comments by a UK-based participant during the Share Network Refugee Convention in Brussels, 26 April 2023.

68 MPI Europe researcher conversation with a representative of FEP in France, 26 April 2023.

69 Reset, 'Campaigns – CommuniTeas', accessed 16 May 2023.

70 Reyes-Soto, 'Recruiting, Developing, and Sustaining Sponsor Groups'; MPI Europe interview with representatives of the Open Community in Ireland, 18 January 2023.

advertises voiced by a famous actress, appealing for volunteers to extend a warm welcome to refugees from Syria and Afghanistan in Ireland.<sup>71</sup> This campaign, which consisted of 48 radio adverts aired across two one-week windows, led to sign-ups from people in more than 20 counties across the country as well as considerable interest in an online introductory event.<sup>72</sup> In Germany, meanwhile, the ZKS has noted that working with state-level figures can help open new doors for recruitment.<sup>73</sup>

Expanding the number of entities involved in outreach would, however, require careful planning. The intermediary or umbrella organisations and national government stakeholders leading the sponsorship programme would need to provide appropriate support and resources to ensure new outreach partners have the tools to engage effectively with their target audiences. For example, having branded advertising materials (e.g., a logo, flyers, templates) can help build a visual identity for the sponsorship programme that strengthens public awareness of and interest in it.

## Building understanding of who is most likely to become a sponsor to inform targeted outreach

In addition to diversifying the stakeholders involved in outreach and relying on their capacity to leverage their networks, sponsorship programmes can take steps to identify which segments of the population are most likely to volunteer as sponsors. This information is important for understanding which audiences are the highest-value targets for outreach efforts, what channels of communication and partners can help reach them, and how to more strategically use limited programme resources. A variety of approaches (such as market studies, interviews, online surveys, or, simply, a review of existing evidence) can yield valuable insights on private individuals' willingness to participate in sponsorship, their motivations, and basic socioeconomic data.

- ▶ **Conducting market studies.** An illustrative example of how market studies can be used to support the identification of potential sponsors comes from the ReSpo initiative launched by Refugee 613, a Canadian NGO, in 2021 with the aim of recruiting 500 sponsors for the BVOR programme.<sup>74</sup> To advance this goal, Refugee 613 collaborated with various stakeholders to conduct a market study using an online survey that would help the organisation identify a pool of Canadians who would potentially be open to participating in the programme.<sup>75</sup> The survey led to the identification of 4 million Canadians potentially open to engaging in private sponsorship, out of whom 450,000 said they would 'definitely consider' joining. In addition to shedding light on the level of interest in the country, the survey enabled Refugee 613 to collect valuable data on the socioeconomic profile, geographic location, and

71 The radio recruitment campaign in February and March 2023 was organised by UNHCR, Amnesty Ireland, and partner organisations and aimed to support the soft relaunch of the sponsorship programme. See Little Black Book, '[Community Sponsorship Ireland Invites Volunteers to Open up Communities to Refugees](#)', updated 23 February 2023.

72 Comments by a representative of the Open Community during a meeting of the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Network, Working Group on Community Sponsorship, Dublin, 23 May 2023.

73 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ,Neustart im Team'*.

74 Refugee 613 was introduced in Canada in 2013 to support private individuals under the country's sponsorship programmes.

75 Stakeholders involved included representatives of IRCC and UNHCR, former refugees, sponsors, policymakers, and researchers. The online survey used a representative sample of 3,000 Canadians ages 25 and over who had household incomes of \$30,000 or more. The survey was administered between January 27 and February 5, 2021, with the sample stratified to ensure representation by province, age, and gender, according to the most recent population statistics. See Neuman, *Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada*.

motivations of interested individuals—insights the organisation could use to decide which parts of the country were most important to focus on and how best to tailor social marketing strategies to the four most promising audience identified (young urbanites, diverCity families, golden years, and upscale families).<sup>76</sup> For instance, the market study showed that people who personally know someone who has had a positive sponsorship experience express the most interest in becoming sponsors, which reinforces the idea that having previous sponsors act as ambassadors can be an effective recruitment mechanism. In a similar vein, the Open Community in Ireland launched a communication strategy in 2023 that includes the development of audience personas, promotional activities and products, and targeted messaging.<sup>77</sup>

- ▶ **Leveraging existing evidence.** An alternative approach is to rely on existing evidence. This was the strategy employed by Reset in the United Kingdom in its ‘Communities for Refugees’ sponsor recruitment campaign, which ran from October 2020 to April 2021. Reset adopted a targeted strategy focusing on a specific profile of individuals who, based on experiences and data from Canada and the United Kingdom, were identified as most likely to join: women ages 50 and above who were either retired or semi-retired. To reach their target audience, Reset collaborated with organisations that have similar audiences, requesting that they promote Reset’s recruitment campaign. The campaign yielded significant results, with 772 sign-ups. Notably, many younger adults (under age 44) also expressed an interest, emphasising their desire to strengthen their sense of community. As a result of the campaign, a total of 43 new sponsor groups were formed.<sup>78</sup>
- ▶ **Targeting messaging.** Data, whether self-produced or existing, can serve not only as a foundation for identifying target audiences but also as a tool to develop an outreach strategy that effectively engages these audiences, addresses their concerns, and leverages their motivations. Identifying what motivates people to join a programme can help shape the messaging and even the messengers the programme uses to approach potential sponsors. For example, in Germany, after identifying that a desire to help refugees is a major motivation for people who join the sponsorship programme, the ZKS began focusing their messaging on how sponsor groups can make a meaningful contribution to refugees’ successful integration (including through emotion-provoking videos and other content showing the impact of the programme on the lives of sponsored refugees).<sup>79</sup> Similarly, an evaluation of the Canadian BVOR programme found that a compelling narrative or initiative centred on supporting a specific group of refugees (e.g., Syrians) helps attract public support and ensure sponsors’ interests are aligned with refugees needs, and recommended using a similar approach to expand the programme’s sponsorship base.<sup>80</sup>

76 The Refugee 613 study defined ‘young urbanites’ as younger and middle-aged singles, couples, and families who consider themselves ‘citizens of the world’ who value diversity in their communities. ‘DiverCity families’ include first- and second-generation Canadians living in big cities. The ‘golden years’ group refers to older couples and families in suburban neighbourhoods. And ‘upscale families’ refers to upper-middle-income, suburban families in which adults are mostly 35–54 years old and children are age 10 or older. MPI Europe interview with a representative of Refugee 613, 18 October 2022; MPI Europe researcher conversation with a representative of Refugee 613, 1 September 2023; comments by a Canadian official at the CAPS-EU roundtable ‘Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors’.

77 MPI Europe interview with representatives of the Open Community in Ireland, 18 January 2023.

78 MPI Europe interview with a representative of Reset in the United Kingdom, 13 September 2022.

79 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ‚Neustart im Team‘*.

80 IRCC, *Evaluation of the BVOR Program*.

## ***B. Address barriers to participation linked to programme design and enhance support mechanisms for sponsors***

While robust outreach to a broader pool of potential participants is an important first step, it is not enough to ensure a sponsorship programme's sustainability. The design of the programme must also make it possible for interested individuals to commit. Setting the programme up in a way that facilitates the involvement of people with different amounts of time and personal resources to dedicate to sponsoring and establishing a comprehensive support structure for sponsors can help ensure that more people are able to participate and that sponsors are a more diverse group.

European responses to displacement from Ukraine have shed light on the impact that modifying programme design elements can have on participation. For example, by simplifying application procedures and easing programme requirements related to the scope and length of sponsorship commitments, such programmes have been able to attract a wider range of individuals.<sup>81</sup> The UK-based Home for Ukraine hosting programme launched in 2022, for instance, demonstrated how limiting programme requirements and shortening the length of time sponsors (or hosts) were asked to commit to the programme made it possible to engage a different profile of sponsors. Compared to the older, often-retired adults who typically act as sponsors in traditional sponsorship initiatives, this approach seems to have appealed to more young adults; approximately 38 per cent of sponsors in the Home for Ukraine programme were under the age of 44, and many were actively employed and had children.<sup>82</sup>

*European responses to displacement from Ukraine have shed light on the impact that modifying programme design elements can have on participation.*

### **Lowering barriers to participation**

The extensive list of tasks sponsors are expected to take on and duration of their commitment in traditional resettlement-based sponsorship—along with long wait times during application screening, group formation, and resource mobilisation—have deterred some otherwise motivated individuals from participating. This is especially the case where there are other, less demanding ways to support refugees. In fact, it is widely recognised among government and nongovernmental sponsorship stakeholders

81 It should be noted, however, that perceptions that Ukrainians are of a similar cultural background to host-community members and, at least initially, that only short-term engagement would be needed may have influenced participation.

82 The gender distribution of hosts in the Home for Ukraine programme (45 per cent male and 55 per cent female) was also a more even split than in the UK community sponsorship scheme (20 per cent male and 80 per cent female). The majority of hosts for Ukrainians were still over age 50, but a considerable share (38 per cent) were ages 30–49, and most were employed (67 per cent) rather than retired (26 per cent). See UK Office for National Statistics, 'Experiences of Homes for Ukraine Scheme Sponsors – Follow-up, UK: 21 to 28 November 2022'; updated 16 December 2022; Reset, 'Community Sponsorship Group Outcomes Report: What do you learn and gain from sponsoring refugees?' (outcomes document, accessed 22 May 2023).

that more people would be more willing to act as sponsors if they were not required to take on financial responsibilities or, at the very least, housing responsibilities.<sup>83</sup>

- ▶ **Limiting the extent of sponsors' (administrative) tasks.** To address low recruitment numbers and retention issues such as sponsor burnout, some sponsorship programmes have taken steps to narrow down the list of tasks assigned to sponsors. For example, the French humanitarian corridor model has since 2017 allocated experienced social workers to assist sponsored refugees with the most challenging and time-consuming administrative tasks. This allows volunteers to focus on facilitating refugees' social integration and handling less complex administrative procedures. Relieving sponsors of the responsibility to handle administrative complexities has also contributed to the programme's high retention rate: as of 2021, 75 per cent of sponsor groups had prior sponsorship experience.<sup>84</sup>
- ▶ **Lessening the financial burden on sponsors.** Where feasible, limiting the costs sponsors must cover can make participation possible for a wider range of interested individuals. In Germany, for example, feedback from NesT programme participants collected as part of BAMF's evaluation prompted the programme in 2023 to modify the requirement that sponsors cover the cost of refugees' housing, reducing it from two years to one year.<sup>85</sup> In Finland and Sweden, pilot programmes launched in 2023 have taken a more radical approach by introducing a hybrid model in which sponsorship is envisioned as a supportive tool to facilitate the social integration of refugees, relieving sponsors of financial (and administrative) support obligations.<sup>86</sup> The government assumes the full financial burden, plus responsibility for housing and administrative procedures, allowing sponsors to focus primarily on supporting refugees' integration into their local communities. To take a final example, an evaluation of the Canadian BVOR programme suggested that it may need to rethink the way costs are shared between the government and sponsors in order to incentivise greater participation.<sup>87</sup>
- ▶ **Reducing time commitments linked to integration support.** In addition to adjusting the scope of sponsors' commitments, reassessing their duration can also affect programme engagement. Responses to Ukrainian displacement showed that larger numbers of individuals were willing to host people in need for shorter periods. For example, HIAS Europe's Welcome Circle Programme for Ukrainians, which requires groups of volunteers to support Ukrainian newcomers for six months, had by March 2023 managed to support more than 600 Ukrainians in 11 countries.<sup>88</sup> While longer sponsorship periods are generally seen as beneficial or even necessary to assist refugees in their

83 IRCC, *Evaluation of the BVOR Program*; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Nasc in Ireland, 19 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Home from Home sponsorship group in Ireland, 19 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Naas sponsorship group in Ireland, 21 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Lismore sponsorship group in Ireland, 14 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Caritas Belgium, 10 October 2022; participant comments at the CAPS-EU roundtable 'Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors'.

84 MPI Europe researcher conversation with a representative of FEP in France, 26 April 2023.

85 In addition to reducing sponsors' obligations to finance the net rent (Nettokaltniete), NesT programme guidelines and trainings have also sought to make mentoring groups aware that small, unexpected costs may arise. They are encouraged to prepare for costs of up to 500 euros in addition to the cost of rent. MPI Europe researcher conversation with a representative of BAMF, 26 April 2023.

86 MPI Europe interview with a representative of the Finnish Red Cross, 16 March 2023.

87 IRCC, *Evaluation of the BVOR Program*.

88 MPI Europe interview with a representative of HIAS Europe, 30 March 2023. HIAS Europe's Welcome Circle programme requires individuals to form groups of five to eight volunteers who must undergo a background check and present a welcoming plan outlining how they will support newcomers' access to housing, schools, the labour market, and other services. See HIAS, 'Welcome Circles', accessed 14 July 2023.



integration process, shorter-term support can still have a significant positive impact on refugees' lives—and make it possible for more people with more varied profiles to act as sponsors.

- ▶ **Revising application requirements and procedures.** Requirements related to application and group formation should also be open to adaptation, where necessary. For instance, in Germany, government authorities, guided by the findings of the programme evaluation, opted to reduce the number of sponsors in a group from five to four.<sup>89</sup> And in Ireland, interest in sponsorship seems to have increased after the programme eliminated the requirement that potential sponsor groups secure housing at the time of submitting an application.<sup>90</sup> But while there are often ways to streamline applications, some amount of paperwork and screening is necessary. Minimum standards and vetting mechanisms help safeguard the well-being of both sponsors and refugees, maintain the integrity of the sponsorship process, and promote successful integration outcomes.

## Setting up a comprehensive support system and making it visible to sponsors

Providing sponsors with more robust support and ensuring they are aware of this support system can help with programme recruitment and retention. Supporting sponsors as they navigate housing and administrative procedures and ensuring that a safety net is in place to assist with unforeseen challenges can help people feel confident as they join the programme and encourage more to stay engaged.

- ▶ **Supporting sponsors' search for accommodations.** Where responsibility for finding and financing housing rests with sponsors, ensuring that they have appropriate support is key. Local NGOs, authorities, and intermediary organisations in various countries have stepped in to assist sponsors with securing suitable accommodations through, for instance, leveraging their networks, facilitating access to grants and loans, establishing housing registries, or simply by producing housing guidelines for navigating the rental market.<sup>91</sup> In Germany, the Evangelical Church of Westphalia, the Archdiocese of Cologne, and the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising have provided guarantee funds to help sponsors secure housing upfront—assistance that has made it possible for interested sponsor groups with fewer financial resources to participate.<sup>92</sup> The 2023 evaluation of the NesT programme also highlighted the importance of involving the ZKS more in supporting sponsors' search for housing, including through partnerships with housing associations, soliciting support from municipalities, and even establishing a nationwide nonprofit fund (like the one that exists in the UK sponsorship programme).<sup>93</sup> The creation of housing registries, as seen in Canada and France, has similarly simplified

89 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ,Neustart im Team'*.

90 MPI Europe interview with a representative of Nasc in Ireland, 19 October 2022.

91 In Belgium, Caritas has played a key role in helping sponsor groups identify housing by reaching out to the organisation's networks in search of welcoming landlords willing to rent to refugees. In Germany, to take another example, the Evangelical Church of Westphalia (EKvW) introduced grants and loans for sponsors to help them finance housing upfront (as required), which they will then repay to EKvW in instalments. MPI Europe interview with a representative of Nasc in Ireland, 19 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of Caritas Belgium, 10 October 2022; MPI Europe interview with a representative of EKvW, 27 April 2021.

92 MPI Europe interview with a representative of EKvW, 27 April 2021; Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ,Neustart im Team'*.

93 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ,Neustart im Team'*.

the task of finding suitable and affordable housing for sponsored refugees.<sup>94</sup> And in some cases, government actors have facilitated access to social housing (e.g., in Canada).<sup>95</sup> Beyond direct support, sponsors could also benefit from a compiled, accessible guide to fundraising strategies.<sup>96</sup> The German evaluation, for example, identified several crowdfunding strategies and cooperation with regional banks or local Rotary clubs as promising options to help new sponsor groups searching for housing.<sup>97</sup>

- ▶ **Facilitating peer learning.** Platforms to help sponsors learn from one another, including by sharing experiences and best practices, have proven to be valuable resources and a unique form of support.<sup>98</sup> For example, a WhatsApp group exists in Ireland to facilitate peer support among sponsor group members who may be facing similar challenges and to help others learn from their experiences.<sup>99</sup> And in Germany, the ZKS organises annual meetings where sponsors from different groups can share experiences and promising practices with each other.
- ▶ **Securing a safety net.** Safety net measures are essential to ensure that sponsors are not overwhelmed by unforeseen circumstances and that both sponsors and refugees receive appropriate support.<sup>100</sup> These may include emergency funds or clear plans for the intervention of national authorities if the sponsorship arrangement does not work out or if sponsored refugees need more support than anticipated (e.g., medical or mental health cases). In the United Kingdom, for example, the sponsorship programme has safety net plans based on predefined responsibilities for the municipality and the Home Office in cases where a sponsorship arrangement is discontinued.<sup>101</sup> In Ireland, intermediary organisations are expected to work with sponsors and refugees help them resolve issues before ending the sponsorship relationship and, if necessary, refugees can continue their settlement via the state-led resettlement system.<sup>102</sup>

94 In France, for example, a national platform for refugee housing was introduced as a pilot project by the Inter-Ministerial Delegation for Accommodation and Access to Housing (Délégation interministérielle à l'hébergement et à l'accès au logement). The platform maps available accommodations outside of large cities and matches beneficiaries of international protection with them. See European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 'Housing – France', Asylum Information Database, updated 11 May 2023.

In Canada, municipal governments, nonprofit organisations, and sponsors have engaged landlords by establishing cross-sector councils or task forces. These groups work to meet refugees' housing needs, including by making public calls to landlords to provide housing, creating housing registries for refugees, and making information about the benefits of renting to refugees available to landlords (e.g., refugees have guaranteed income for their first year, making regular rent payments more likely). See Ervis Martani, 'Canada's Private Sponsorship Program: Success, Shortcomings, and Policy Solutions' (working paper no. 6, Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration and Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement, Ryerson University, Toronto, 2021).

95 Martani, 'Canada's Private Sponsorship Program'.

96 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ,Neustart im Team'*.

97 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ,Neustart im Team'*.

98 Susan Fratzke and Emma Dorst, *Volunteers and Sponsors: A Catalyst for Refugee Integration?* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2019).

99 Comments by a representative of an intermediary organisation at the CAPS-EU roundtable 'Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors'.

100 ICF and MPI Europe, *Study on the Feasibility and Added Value of Sponsorship Schemes as a Possible Pathway to Safe Channels for Admission to the EU, Including Resettlement* (Brussels: European Commission Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2018).

101 International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) Europe, *Expanding Complementary Pathways for Refugee Resettlement* (Brussels: ICMC Europe, 2017).

102 Irish Department of Justice and Equality, 'Community Sponsorship Ireland: A Guide for Prospective Sponsor' (guidance document, Irish Department of Justice and Equality, Dublin, accessed 22 May 2023).

## Reconsidering matching procedures

The use of naming in sponsorship programmes (e.g., in Canada's PSR programme or Germany's subnational State Admission Programmes [Landesaufnahmeprogramme]) has played a significant role in facilitating some of the largest sponsorship efforts to date. While most national resettlement-based sponsorship programmes have not adopted this approach in order to maintain a focus on vulnerable refugees and avoid becoming family reunification channels, there are alternative approaches that can and have been used to foster greater sponsor involvement in the matching process and incentivise sustained engagement.

Programmes could, for example, take into account sponsors' skills (such as language proficiency) and cultural or religious background, and involve sponsors to some degree in matching decisions to strengthen their sense of ownership over the process and prevent frustration.<sup>103</sup> This has been done, for example, either by giving sponsors the opportunity to suggest matches themselves (that is, expressing interest in sponsoring an individual or family from within a pool of refugees already identified for resettlement) or by modifying existing matching procedures to consult with and incorporate sponsors' preferences to the extent feasible.

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*While most national resettlement-based sponsorship programmes have not adopted this approach in order to maintain a focus on vulnerable refugees and avoid becoming family reunification channels, there are alternative approaches that can and have been used to foster greater sponsor involvement in the matching.*

- ▶ **Giving sponsors a direct voice.** A few sponsorship programmes involve sponsors and, in some cases, refugees as well in the matching process, while still relying on national authorities to approve matches. The Canadian BVOR programme offers an interesting example of balancing sponsor involvement and government oversight. While the final decision rests with immigration officers, prospective sponsors make the first move by proposing a match, after consulting a government platform where a list of potential beneficiaries is published.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, the U.S. sponsorship programme introduced in 2023 allows sponsors and beneficiaries to connect and agree to initiate a sponsorship arrangement through the Welcome Connect platform, on which both parties can create profiles and engage in conversations to find a suitable match. Eventually, to formalise the match, sponsors and refugees are required to complete a form and submit it to the U.S. government.<sup>105</sup> In some countries, matching platforms have been created and are directly operated by sponsor groups and sponsored refugees themselves,

<sup>103</sup> University of Birmingham, Institute for Research into Superdiversity, 'Improving the UK's Community Sponsorship Scheme' (issue brief, 2020).

<sup>104</sup> Refugees' profiles (family size, age, gender, country of origin) are posted on a designated Refugee Sponsorship Training Program – BVOR website, usually for two weeks, and potential sponsors can select a refugee to support. IRCC oversees matching. See IRCC, *Evaluation of the BVOR Program*.

<sup>105</sup> For example, in the Sponsor Circles Program in the United States, sponsors and beneficiaries can agree to initiate a sponsorship arrangement after chatting on the Welcome Connect platform, where both parties can create a profile and message each other in order to find an appropriate match. Eventually, to formalise the match, they both have to fill out a form and submit it to the U.S. government. See Welcome Connect, 'How Will Welcome Connect Work?'; accessed 16 May 2023; Sponsorship Circles, 'Frequently Asked Questions'; accessed 16 May 2023.

particularly in response to displacement from Ukraine.<sup>106</sup> These sponsor- and refugee-owned platforms have proven useful in expediting matching procedures, yet they have also highlighted the need for appropriate government oversight to guarantee the security of both sponsors and refugees.

► **Channelling sponsors' skills and preferences into matching decisions through third parties.**

Even where sponsors' direct involvement in selecting matches is not feasible or aligned with programme objectives or vetting concerns, options exist to incorporate sponsors' preferences, characteristics, and concerns into matching decisions, without overly decentralising the process. The humanitarian corridor model in Italy serves as an example in this regard. In that programme, civil-society organisations suggest matches based on their close collaboration with NGOs in the countries where refugees are before they are resettled and with intermediary organisations in Italy, leading to better-informed matches.<sup>107</sup> However, asking civil-society organisations to take multiple variables and matching criteria into consideration can be time consuming and not always feasible in practice. Alternatively, some sponsorship initiatives have begun to explore the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) to support the development of personalised, efficient matching models. For instance, Pairity, a Canadian NGO, has developed an algorithm (tested in, among other contexts, the Netherlands and the U.S. programme for displaced Ukrainians) that suggests matches based on data from demographic and preference-ranking surveys completed by sponsors and interviews with refugees.<sup>108</sup> The algorithm considers variables such as household composition, newcomer vulnerabilities and sponsor capacity, refugees' labour market experience, language and culture, and hobbies and interests. By considering multiple variables and the preferences of both refugees and sponsors, this AI-based matching approach aims to enhance refugee integration while also having a positive impact on sponsors' experience, engagement, and retention. However, limited evidence exists to date on how AI matches compare to other matching schemes, and what amount of human oversight is needed to ensure the integrity of such systems.

### C. *Prepare sponsors and local communities for refugee arrivals to maximise sponsor retention*

Effective information sharing, capacity-building trainings, and management of expectations for both sponsors and other local stakeholders prior to refugees' arrival are essential elements of preventing sponsor burnout. Monitoring tools able to identify issues before they escalate also play a vital role in ensuring that sponsored refugees receive appropriate settlement and integration support and that sponsors have a positive experience with the programme.<sup>109</sup>

106 For example, several private websites (Shelter4Ukraine, Room for Ukraine) have facilitated matching in the Netherlands. In Estonia, a large real estate portal, Kinnisvara24, used its existing digital infrastructure to create a dedicated site presenting an aggregated list of rental properties whose owners confirmed their willingness to rent to Ukrainian refugees. This platform permitted interested private hosts to reach the target group. See Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 'Housing Support for Ukrainian Refugees in Receiving Countries' (brief in the Policy Responses: Ukraine Tackling the Policy Challenges series, OECD Publishing, Paris, July 2022).

107 MPI Europe researcher conversation with a representative of Federazione delle chiese evangeliche in Italia (FCEI), 26 April 2023.

108 Pairity conducts 35-minute online surveys with sponsors and 60-minute in-person surveys with refugees. The data collected through the surveys are then used by an algorithm to make optimised matches through scoring and randomisation. See Pairity, 'Platform Details', accessed 16 May 2023.

109 Fratzke et al., *Refugee Sponsorship Programmes*.

## Managing expectations early on and throughout the programme

Ensuring individuals receive accurate and timely information about programme requirements, the time commitment involved, available support, and the process for helping sponsored refugees transition out of the programme is crucial to avoid false expectations, minimise frustration, and maximise sponsor retention rates. This must be done in both the pre-arrival stage, through efforts to shape realistic expectations, and the post-arrival stage, through ongoing support systems that allow sponsors to raise concerns and adjust their expectations.

- ▶ **Facilitating pre-arrival interactions to help sponsors and refugees setting realistic expectations.** Sponsors who have the opportunity to connect with refugees before they arrive in the receiving community have reported feeling better informed about the individual's or family's needs and cultural background. In situations where public awareness of and support for resettlement fluctuate rapidly, as observed when public attention swung from refugee resettlement to responses to Ukrainian displacement, these pre-arrival interactions can help maintain sponsors' motivation and engagement during prolonged delays in arrivals, and prevent drop out.<sup>110</sup> In Belgium, for example, the International Organisation for Migration has supported the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) and Caritas International Belgium (an intermediary organisation) in organising online predeparture call between sponsor groups and refugees, enabling them to meet in advance and helping to manage expectations on both sides.<sup>111</sup>
- ▶ **Bridging linguistic and cultural differences.** The use of interpreters or intercultural mediators who are familiar with refugees' countries of origin and departure and who speak their languages can help facilitate mutual understanding and bring proximity and trust to the relationship between sponsor groups and refugees.<sup>112</sup> In Belgium, social workers from Caritas have fulfilled this role, while in France, the FEP (a civil-society organisation) has engaged previously sponsored refugees to participate in pre- and post-arrival meetings, drawing on their experiences to shape realistic expectations.<sup>113</sup>
- ▶ **Designing comprehensive trainings and written resources to rectify assumptions.** Pre- and post-arrival training programmes, together with informational resources such as fact sheets and guidance documents, can be useful in rectifying false assumptions sponsors may have. Such resources can provide sponsors with a more accurate understanding of refugees' culture and the context for their resettlement. In general, when sponsors have well-formed expectations and a better understanding of refugees' cultural and national background and integration journey, they tend to exhibit more patience and less frustration and, ultimately, are more likely to sponsor again in the future.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, ensuring refugees have information about the nature of the sponsorship programme in advance of

110 IRCC, *Evaluation of the BVOR Program*; comments by a representative of an intermediary organisation at the CAPS-EU roundtable 'Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors'; participant comments at the CAPS-EU webinar 'Managing Expectations of Sponsors and Refugees'.

111 Comments by a representative of an intermediary organisation at the CAPS-EU roundtable 'Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors'.

112 Meetings between intercultural mediators, refugee families, and sponsor groups are organised on an as-needed basis, but they typically take place four or five times during the welcoming period. Participant comments during the CAPS-EU webinar 'Managing Expectations of Sponsors and Refugees'.

113 Comments by a representative of a French civil-society organisation during the CAPS-EU roundtable 'Recruitment and Retention of Sponsors'.

114 Fratzke, *Engaging Communities in Refugee Protection*.



resettlement can help them set realistic expectations for the support they will receive, potentially reducing frustration and tensions with sponsor groups after arrival.

## Raising awareness and building capacity at the local level

Resettlement-based sponsorship is a relatively new concept for many local authority officials and service providers. As a result, many have limited knowledge about sponsored refugees' situation and rights, sponsors' position, and the role local actors are expected to play within these programmes. Efforts to bridge this gap can take a variety of forms, including those described below, and are important not only to help sponsors avoid administrative fatigue but also to better prepare communities as a whole to welcome sponsored refugees.

- ▶ **Running sensitisation campaigns.** Local messaging campaigns and information sessions, either in person or online, can help disseminate essential information about resettlement-based sponsorship programmes and address any doubts or concerns local stakeholders may have. By raising awareness and providing accurate details, these activities can help educate local officials and service providers about the programme's objectives and processes, and what roles each stakeholder is expected to play. In Belgium, for instance, Fedasil initiated meetings with local authorities in 2022 to increase awareness and foster discussion of potential collaboration opportunities in areas such as identifying suitable housing, establishing volunteer groups, and engaging local associations. And in Germany, a government agency (the Federal Commissioner for Migration, Refugees, and Integration) has provided information about the NesT programme to integration officers across the country's federal states and municipalities.<sup>115</sup>
- ▶ **Setting up a contact point or help desk.** Some sponsors in Ireland have suggested designating a contact person within each relevant ministry who would receive specialised training on sponsorship and related administrative procedures. This designated expert could serve as a central point of contact or help desk for public workers at the local level, providing guidance and clarification when needed, ensuring local stakeholders have access to accurate and timely information, and relieving sponsors of the need to explain programme details to unaware local authorities.<sup>116</sup>
- ▶ **Producing official guidance documents.** Guidelines, fact sheets, and other informational resources published by government authorities or other trusted sources outlining the rights of sponsored refugees and what that means for local actors can help raise those stakeholders' awareness of the sponsorship programme, facilitate more informed conversations, and ensure refugees' rights are upheld.<sup>117</sup> In the United Kingdom, for example, intermediary organisations have played a key role in producing extensive guidance and training materials for local authorities, covering how the programme works, what tasks the authorities are expected to complete or support, and what funding is available as they do so.<sup>118</sup>

115 Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ‚Neustart im Team‘*.

116 MPI Europe interview with a representative of Home from Home sponsorship group in Ireland, 19 October 2022.

117 MPI Europe interview with a representative of Naas sponsor group in Ireland, 21 October 2022.

118 Reset, 'For Local Authorities', accessed 2 September 2023.

## Setting up effective monitoring mechanisms

Setting up monitoring mechanisms from an early stage in the development of a sponsorship programme is crucial for providing proper support to sponsored refugees, addressing challenges and misunderstandings as they arise, and generally ensuring smooth programme operations. In doing so, monitoring tools can also prevent sponsors from dropping out, encourage retention, and prevent unaddressed issues from giving the programme a bad reputation. While many pilots have commissioned external programme evaluations, there is value in building a monitoring and evaluation system into the programme itself to gauge whether and to what extent programme elements (such as trainings, expectation management activities, and guidance materials) are meeting their objectives and to identify areas for improvement.

- ▶ **Systematising monitoring efforts.** Caritas Belgium serves as an excellent example of implementing effective monitoring practices, starting early on in a sponsorship programme's development. Monitoring meetings between sponsor groups and programme staff are held at regular intervals, including at the end of Months 1, 3, 6, and 12 of the sponsorship period. These meetings have enabled Caritas to identify and address any tensions or misunderstandings between group members or with sponsored refugees, or to address mismatches between what sponsors expected their roles to entail and their activities to date. The presence of intercultural mediators in these meetings has facilitated interpretation and fostered trust among participants.<sup>119</sup> In France, the FEP conducts monitoring sessions to assess key performance indicators, including access to housing, employment, social welfare, and sponsored refugees' proficiency in the French language, and follows up on the information gathered via multistakeholder discussions at the regional level involving the regional platform, social workers, sponsored refugees, and sponsor groups.<sup>120</sup>
- ▶ **Creating easy ways to report issues and receive on-call support.** In addition to its monitoring system, Caritas Belgium has established a 24/7 help desk, which provides group members with a reliable point of contact from which to seek advice or report any problems they encounter within the sponsorship relationship or among group members. The availability of this resource encourages sponsors to make programme staff aware of issues as they arise and helps them quickly access guidance and assistance.<sup>121</sup>

Such monitoring efforts, in addition to enhancing refugees' and sponsors' experience in the programme, can also help create an evidence base for the impact of sponsorship programmes. This evidence, in turn, can be used to inform broader policy conversations, advocacy efforts, and public communications around the programme.

119 MPI Europe interview with a representative of Caritas Belgium, 10 October 2022.

120 Participant comments during the SHARE Quality Sponsorship Network workshop 'Monitoring of Community Sponsorship', June 16, 2021. For more information on this workshop, see SHARE Network and Caritas Belgium, 'Workshop on Monitoring of Community Sponsorship' (conference report, accessed 1 September 2023).

121 MPI Europe interview with a representative of Caritas Belgium, 10 October 2022.

## 4 Conclusions and Recommendations

Sponsorship programmes have shown considerable promise in Europe and elsewhere as tools to both expand protection pathways and involve receiving-community members more directly in welcoming refugee newcomers. While their design and scale may vary from country to country, the strength of all these programmes lies in the private individuals who volunteer their time, energy, and personal resources to make them possible.

To sustain and expand sponsorship initiatives, significant investments are needed to raise awareness of them, enhance their appeal to potential sponsors, and build out the support structures necessary to help sponsors succeed in and enjoy their role—and ideally encourage them to repeat it in the future. As this study highlights, there are many ways programmes can (and in some cases, have already begun to) take such steps, including by adjusting programme design elements.

For example, revising the extent and duration of sponsor commitments can make it possible for more interested individuals to engage, though such adjustments must be balanced against the need to maintain programme standards and ensure refugees receive sufficient support. Furthermore, exploring ways to give sponsors a greater say in the matching process (such as by allowing repeat sponsors to name or be matched with extended family members of the first refugees they supported) could motivate more people to sign up for another round of sponsorship, creating an ‘echo effect’ and encouraging organic programme growth, as seen in other initiatives with this feature.<sup>122</sup>

Beyond these programme design questions, outreach focused on recruiting sponsors, and tools to support their work in a programme, several other considerations also merit further attention:

- ▶ **Developing a compelling narrative around sponsorship.** Media coverage has played an important role in drawing attention to refugee issues during crises and in shaping public perception of refugees. However, media coverage of refugee crises (as with most current affairs) tends to diminish over time, as observed with the civil war in Syria.<sup>123</sup> To sustain interest in helping refugees, it is crucial for resettlement-based sponsorship programmes to develop their own narratives that emphasise the ongoing importance of the programmes’ work. Investing in promotional materials that illustrate sponsorship’s relevance and impact, including through videos of and testimonies from previous sponsors and sponsored refugees, can inspire more people to actively contribute to sponsorship efforts. Monitoring and evaluation efforts, in addition to improving programme operations, can be instrumental in collecting impact stories and other types of information that can be used to craft impactful public communications.

<sup>122</sup> University of Birmingham, Institute for Research into Superdiversity, ‘Motivating and Sustaining Community Sponsorship Volunteers’ (issue brief, 2020).

<sup>123</sup> University of Birmingham, Institute for Research into Superdiversity, ‘Motivating and Sustaining Community Sponsorship Volunteers’.

- ▶ **Facilitating sponsor group formation.** Private individuals who show an interest in becoming a sponsor are eager to contribute but often would prefer not to take the lead in forming a sponsor group. Identifying and supporting ‘catalyst’ sponsors who are willing to take on this role can help facilitate the process of group formation. As an alternative, establishing an online platform to connect prospective sponsors with individuals seeking to set up their own group can go a long way towards accomplishing this goal and encouraging participation in the programme.<sup>124</sup> Coordination and oversight of the platform could be entrusted to umbrella or intermediary organisations, who can provide guidance, support, and ensure its smooth and secure operation.
- ▶ **Investing in local awareness-raising activities.** Efforts to raise awareness around resettlement-based sponsorship should not only target potential sponsors but also key local stakeholders, such as service providers, local authorities, and relevant actors in the housing market. Actively engaging and educating these stakeholders about the sponsorship process can help programmes run more smoothly and successfully by reducing the burden on sponsors and fostering more welcoming communities. This could be done, for example, by organising information or training sessions, developing written resources, or setting up a help desk (e.g., that local administrators could call with questions about how to handle administrative procedures involving sponsored refugees).
- ▶ **Securing sufficient engagement from national government stakeholders.** The national government’s active and visible engagement is instrumental to building trust in and support for resettlement-based sponsorship programmes. Government involvement is valuable for tasks ranging from coordinating the work of local officials in different parts of the country and raising their awareness of the programme, to overseeing the programme, ensuring that minimum standards are met, and creating a safety net to help sponsors and refugees in cases where unexpected needs arise or sponsorship arrangements breakdown.<sup>125</sup> Conversely, a lack of visible government involvement in sponsorship efforts can, in some cases, tarnish a programme’s image and make potential sponsors wary of participating in it.

Despite the challenging aspects of community sponsorship—some of them country specific and others more universal—the considerable energy and innovation that has accompanied sponsorship programmes’ launch in a wider range of countries has shed new light on opportunities to address these challenges. Prioritising and investing in the aforementioned areas can contribute to the growth and success of sponsorship initiatives and foster greater community support for refugees as they begin their lives in a new country.

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<sup>124</sup> MPI Europe interview with a representative of Home for Home community support group Ireland, 19 October 2022.

<sup>125</sup> Fratzke et al., *Refugee Sponsorship Programmes*.

## Appendix. Overview of Selected Resettlement-Based Sponsorship Programmes

TABLE A-1

**Characteristics of selected resettlement-based sponsorship programmes and sponsor criteria**

<b>Country, programme, &amp; launch date</b>	<b>Refugees' legal status on arrival</b>	<b>Number of sponsor group members</b>	<b>Sponsored refugees additional to gov.-supported refugees?</b>	<b>Matching mechanism</b>	<b>Administrative and integration support by sponsors?</b>	<b>Housing support by sponsors?</b>
<b>Belgium</b> Community Sponsorship Programme – 2020 (pilot)	Beneficiaries must apply for refugee status but are guaranteed recognition and priority.	4–5	No	Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) makes a shortlist that is discussed by Caritas and sponsor groups.	Yes, sponsors provide support for one year (e.g., opening bank account, accessing social allowance, getting residence permit, registering for school).	Yes, sponsors must find and fully finance refugees' housing for one year.
<b>Canada</b> Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Programme – 2013 (official launch)	Beneficiaries are permanent residents.	5+	Yes	The Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)-funded Refugee Sponsorship Training Program oversees matching. It provides potential sponsors with access to a database of profiles for some (but not all) refugees selected for resettlement, and sponsors express their preferences. IRCC assesses sponsor requests and makes the final decision.	Yes, sponsors provide social, emotional, and settlement support for one year.	Some. Sponsors must find housing for one year, but the costs are shared between sponsors and the government (each covers costs for 6 months).



TABLE A-1 (cont.)

**Characteristics of selected resettlement-based sponsorship programmes and sponsor criteria**

<b>Country, programme, &amp; launch date</b>	<b>Refugees' legal status on arrival</b>	<b>Number of sponsor group members</b>	<b>Sponsored refugees additional to gov.-supported refugees?</b>	<b>Matching mechanism</b>	<b>Administrative and integration support by sponsors?</b>	<b>Housing support by sponsors?</b>
<b>Germany</b> Neustart im Team (New Start in a Team, or NesT) Programme – 2019 (pilot), 2023 (official launch)	Beneficiaries apply for a renewable residence permit upon arrival, initially valid for three years.	4+	Yes	German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) matches refugees with sponsor groups, which can accept or reject a match based on valid reasons.	Yes, sponsors provide support for one year. The residence permit refugees apply for on arrival grants access to welfare state provisions. Sponsors support integration tasks such as enrolling children in schools and adults in language courses.	Yes, sponsors must find and finance refugees' housing for one year.
<b>Ireland</b> Community Sponsorship Programme – 2018 (pilot), 2019 (official launch)	Beneficiaries are considered part of the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP), which allows them to obtain citizenship after three years.	7–12	No	IRPP matches refugees and sponsor groups in consultation with regional support organisations.	Yes, sponsors provide support for 18 months (e.g., opening bank account, accessing housing assistance payment, getting residence permit, registering at school).	Yes, sponsor groups must find and fully finance refugees' housing for a minimum of two years.
<b>United Kingdom</b> Community Sponsorship Scheme – 2016 (official launch)	Beneficiaries enter with indefinite leave to remain and can apply for citizenship after five years.	8–12	Yes	UK Home Office matches refugees and sponsor groups, in collaboration with local authorities.	Yes, sponsors provide support for one year.	Yes, sponsors must find and fully finance refugees' housing for two years.

Notes: The programmes included in the table are from this report's case study countries, plus the Canadian BVOR programme and UK sponsorship programme, which are the oldest and largest resettlement-based sponsorship programmes. In addition to housing costs, sponsors are typically responsible for start-up costs (e.g., furnishing the house, utility connection fees, food staples). In some cases, such as Belgium and Ireland, sponsors may also have to cover additional monthly costs (e.g., food, transport, bills) until refugees have access to social welfare.

Sources: ICMC Europe and Share Network, *Resettlement & Community Sponsorship across Europe*; Citizens UK, 'Sponsor Refugees', accessed 16 May 2023; IRCC, *Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs (GAR, PSR, BVOR and RAP)* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2016); IRCC, *2022 Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2022); IRCC, *Blended Visa Office-Referred Program. Refugee Resettlement in Canada. Important Information* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2019); Tissot, Dumann, and Bitterwolf, *Das Aufnahmeprogramm ,Neustart im Team'*.

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