

Chris Philp MP
Minister for Immigration Compliance and the Courts
Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

23rd July 2020

Dear Minister,

Re: Timescale for Resumption of Refugee Resettlement and Community Sponsorship

We are writing as current and prospective Community Sponsorship Groups to request a timescale for the resumption of refugee resettlement and community sponsorship.

We appreciate the reasons for the suspension of the scheme and the unprecedented pressures on the UK government as a result of the pandemic. We know that Home Office civil servants are preparing for a resumption of the resettlement scheme with the proper precautions in place, and we recognise the efforts they have made to keep us informed given the limitations on their own control of the situation.

However, the absence of a clear timetable for the resumption of the community sponsorship scheme has caused a number of local groups significant difficulties as they prepare to welcome refugee families (please see Appendix for specific examples). The delay means some groups are using up their limited funds to cover rental costs on empty properties secured before lockdown. Other groups at the start of the process are unsure of whether to begin because of the uncertainty. All groups are experiencing a dip in volunteer morale, which is so vital to the success of this scheme.

Therefore we are asking you to provide greater clarity to assist our planning by:

- specifying a target date for the resumption of the community sponsorship scheme (this could resemble the UK government's roadmap to the lifting of coronavirus restrictions);
- clarifying whether we can expect the scheme to resume within the next six months;
- committing to more regular and detailed communication with community sponsorship groups, especially those who are ready to resettle a family.

These small actions on your part would make a big difference in enabling local community sponsorship groups to conserve their volunteer and financial resources for when they are most needed.

We want to reassure you that, while the process of resettlement has paused, over the past months community sponsorship groups have been more active than ever in forming teams, raising money, and submitting applications. As the global need for refugee resettlement continues to increase, our appetite to welcome refugee families is undiminished, and we are keen to maintain this momentum.

We are proud too that, while some other countries are reducing their commitment to refugee resettlement, the UK's policy of refugee resettlement by local authorities and community sponsorship groups is a world leader and has been copied by other countries. We hope the UK can continue its leadership on this issue as the need for refugee resettlement becomes all the more urgent in the aftermath of the pandemic. By increasing communication related to the resumption of the scheme, community sponsorship groups can continue to play our part in the continued success of the UK's resettlement efforts.

We would be grateful to hear your response to our request, and would value the opportunity to meet with you in future to celebrate the success of the UK's resettlement scheme and explore ways in which we can promote community sponsorship. You can write to us at this email address: jonathan.cox@citizensuk.org.

Yours faithfully,



Rachel Griffiths
Herne Hill Welcomes Refugees



Richard Williams
Wendover Resettlement Assistance Project



Revd Michael John
I FamilyCardiff

Supported by the following Community Sponsorship Groups

1. Bath Welcomes Refugees
2. Bude Refugee Support Group
3. Budleigh-Syrian Community Sponsorship
4. Caritas Homes Without Borders (Basingstoke)
5. Caritas Refugee Matters (Fareham)
6. Caritas Rugby 4 Refugees (Ringwood)
7. Caritas ToDaRe (Waterlooville/Horndean)
8. CHARIS Exeter
9. CHARIS Taunton
10. Chulmleigh Community Welcome
11. Companions, Sidmouth
12. Cotham & Redlands Welcome
13. Croeso Cowbridge
14. Croeso Menai
15. Croeso Roath/Cathays
16. E123 Welcomes Refugees (Tower Hamlets)
17. Falmouth and Penryn Welcome Refugee Families
18. Forest Hill and Sydenham Welcome Refugees
19. Greyfriars Community Sponsorship Group (Reading)
20. Hampstead Churches Community Sponsorship Group
21. Herne Hill Welcomes Refugees
22. Ilfracombe Community Welcome
23. Kings Heath Welcomes (Kings Heath Action for Refugees)
24. King's Resettlement Support (London)
25. KSIMC of Birmingham
26. Newport Community Sponsorship Group
27. One Family Cardiff
28. Peckham Sponsors Refugees
29. Sherwood Sponsors Refugees
30. The Pickwell Foundation (Devon)
31. Uplyme Community Sponsorship Group
32. Wendover Resettlement Assistance Project (WRAP).
33. West Hampstead Welcomes
34. Westbury Welcome (Bristol)
35. Citizens UK/Sponsor Refugees (Lead Sponsor)

Appendix: Examples of the practical implications caused by the absence of a roadmap for resumption

Refugee Wellbeing

Vulnerable families, who have been identified by UNHCR as in urgent need for resettlement, are waiting in limbo, at detriment to their physical and mental wellbeing.

- The Pickwell Foundation: “We would like clarity over the decisions to reopen flights, for the sake of the mental health for the family reunification circumstance we are working with”.

Housing:

The Community Sponsorship scheme requires community groups to secure a property for the resettled family at Local Housing Allowance rate. This is a significant challenge for groups, and some take years to find a suitable property. At least two groups have lost their hard-won property, due to the lack of a clear timescale. Approximately ten groups are paying rent on an empty property, using funds that were donated for the refugee family. Having a clear timetable would enable groups and landlords to plan ahead, and potentially rent the property on a short-term contract. It would also enable new groups to start approaching landlords.

- WRAP (Wendover Resettlement Assistance Project): “We were just two days away from welcoming our family of 2 adults and 3 small children on 19 March. We had been very fortunate to find a house at an affordable rent in the centre of our expensive London commuter belt village. So far, we have kept the property but are now using up funds raised from our community on rent. There is a limit as to how long we can justify this without any clarity on when our family will arrive. If we lose the house it is very unlikely we would be able to continue to house this family, with whom we feel we have already formed a bond, even managing to get a message through to them during the lockdown and receiving a response. We are also unsure if we could start again after being so close to their arrival and with such a good offering which we will not be able to repeat”.
- Ifamilycardiff: “We have full approval and have been paying rent on a house since December 2019. Our resources, which were donated for the refugee family, are dwindling”
- Herne Hill Welcomes Refugees: “We have secured a house on the understanding a family would be here in the early autumn. We need an answer regarding the time frame of reinstating the scheme in order to avoid paying unnecessary sums on the storage for furniture we have collected for the property; or having to return the house to its original owners who may choose to use it for a different purpose”.
- Bath Welcomes Refugees: “We have an approved house standing empty with no rent to the landlady and no time frame of course”.
- Forest Hill and Sydenham Welcome Refugees: ““After a lot of hard work by our community group, we are nearly ready to welcome a refugee family. A couple who want to move overseas have offered us their house to rent, but uncertainty about the scheme is making it very difficult for them to clarify their plans. We are all in limbo. We really need to hear what the Home Office is planning to do, and when.”
- Sherwood Sponsors Refugees: “Someone wants to buy a house for us, but there may be an issue if things are delayed too much; she was thinking to just buy the house and leave it empty, which did not seem like a good idea to us in any event, but especially not if it could be 6 months or more”.

- Caritas Homes Without Borders Basingstoke: “Whilst we have achieved Home Office approval in principle, we cannot press forward with a property search as it would not be prudent to make a financial commitment on a lease at present”.

Volunteer Recruitment and Morale

- Rugby 4 Refugees: “This is a creative Caritas CS application, the firsts from a sports club in the UK and the first Rugby Club in the world. When this club gets its approval, think of the potential when other sports club see what they are doing, it has the possibilities for many others sports clubs to follow suit. Most sports clubs would probably not think about doing something like this, but they will find out as this club will promote the idea through their own networks. However the delay and lack of information from the HO is making it hard to keep everyone motivated and moving forward”.
- Ifamilycardiff: “Ifamilycardiff has been working for several years to create a broad volunteer base, raise funds and secure a rental property. We are doing our best to retain existing volunteers and recruit new supporters. Resources are dwindling and morale is fragile. definite news about a likely date to welcome a Syrian family would make a huge difference to all”.
- Sherwood Sponsors Refugees: “Some team members are having to reconsider their input due to changes in circumstances, so we are likely to need to re-recruit to the team, which is difficult with no certainty as to timing”.
- Wendover Resettlement Assistance Project: “Our group is finding it increasingly hard to maintain both our and the community’s commitment, especially when we know that our family is in Turkey from where flights have resumed to the UK. We are struggling to understand why there continues to be a delay”.
- Caritas Homes Without Borders Basingstoke: “Our Group’s motivation has taken a hit whilst we are, like all groups in our position, kicking our heels waiting for some clarity and certainty”.
- CHARIS Taunton and Exeter: “We wish to sponsor two more families, we will seek to recruit and train volunteers as quickly as possible so we can be matched to refugee families. We know the need is even greater now than before, in part because of Covid. It will help us to recruit volunteers and secure accommodation without delay, if we know flights have resumed”.

School Places

- Bath Welcomes Refugees: “We cannot negotiate school places - Bath schools are very full”.
- Wendover Resettlement Assistance Project: “We were fortunate to secure places for the two older children at the full and popular local school Whilst we have managed to retain the places at the local school, continuing to do so will soon become very difficult”.

Funds Raised

- Westbury Welcome: “Supporters have given or are making regular donations to supporting the Sponsorship Groups - we could lose their backing”.

Planning for Safe Support

- Sponsor Refugees: “Once resettlement resumes, we expect that a large number of families will arrive in relatively short-time period. It is important as Lead Sponsor that we know when families are likely to arrive, so that we can plan for sufficient staff capacity to provide oversight and support”.