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FACT SHEET

SETTING AND MANAGING THE EXPECTATIONS OF SPONSORSHIP COMMUNITIES



SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- **The earlier the better:** Expectation management should start in the earliest stages of preparing volunteers to welcome. Balancing the narrative of an individual volunteer or volunteer group's core motivations for sponsoring with the practical realities of sponsorship allows for clear but adaptable expectations to be developed.
- **Experts by Experience:** Volunteers can benefit from hearing about the experience of other volunteers and families welcomed under similar circumstances.
- Pre-application and pre-arrival **training** provided by a central support and knowledge hub permits sustained reflection on evolving expectations, important concepts related to mental health, possible trauma, and the cultural and social realities of settlement.
- **Pre-arrival contact** between volunteers and families can help groups understand key unknowns such as the hosted person's level of autonomy, as well as cultural, religious and social expectations. This can further shift the volunteer group's own assumptions prior to the emotionally charged and logistically complex first days and weeks post-arrival.
- **Boundaries and empowerment:** Volunteers should have multiple opportunities to reflect on the boundaries of their support, and how to empower those they welcome to integrate in a sympathetic but mutually understood manner. This helps to prepare volunteers for scenarios otherwise challenging to navigate in the context of existing assumptions.
- **Life after sponsorship:** Almost as important as managing expectations of what sponsorship will look like is managing expectations of life after formal sponsorship ends. Transition planning well in advance of an exit date helps groups to understand how their relationships will change, and what time and emotions they are capable of dedicating in the long term.
- **Expectation management is a shared endeavour:** Volunteer expectations need to be managed alongside the assumptions of those they welcome. Agency of both the group and refugees should not be undermined by beliefs that are not well grounded in the realities of individual sponsorship and settlement journeys.

WHY IS MANAGING VOLUNTEER EXPECTATIONS IMPORTANT?

Volunteers come to sponsorship from many different backgrounds and belief systems. They may have very specific and personal expectations of how the process will unfold and what the support they will provide to the refugees they are welcoming will look like. These expectations are not always borne out by the experience of welcoming. At the same time the beliefs that underpin them can be incredibly important for maintaining motivation while volunteers navigate challenges over the course of a sponsorship. Through training, resources, and regular opportunities to reflect on expectations alongside welcomed refugees, volunteers can maintain their confidence, adapt to the unpredictable challenges of sponsorship, regularly check their assumptions, and offer the best possible help they can towards meaningful integration outcomes.

GOOD PRACTICES FOR SETTING AND MANAGING EXPECTATIONS OF SPONSORSHIP COMMUNITIES

In broad terms, expectations which need to be considered and managed may arise in three phases of the sponsorship journey: pre-arrival, post-arrival and post-sponsorship.

PRE ARRIVAL - MANAGING VOLUNTEER EXPECTATIONS FROM DAY ONE

Preparing to welcome a family

Volunteers are not always aware of the administrative, bureaucratic, and logistical burdens of sponsorship. Preparing to sponsor before an application is accepted or even submitted can potentially involve long searches for accommodation, coordinating with multiple authorities, and steep learning curves in understanding benefits, education and health systems. Support organisations must make groups aware of these challenges early on and provide adequate resources and opportunities for learning to avoid the volunteer motivation diminishing as a result of administrative burdens.

Experts by Experience

Relating the lived experiences of both those hosted and those hosting is a valuable tool in managing expectations. Resources such as *Experts By Experience*¹ give insight into some of the real challenges and rewards of sponsorship and resettlement from the very beginning of the process to beyond the end of formal sponsorship. Seeing first person examples of the road ahead can give sponsors the motivation to persevere even as their initial positive expectations are challenged by the process.

Mandatory training

Beyond providing volunteers with resources, standardized, and mandatory training is useful to ensure a common language and understanding among volunteers on core concepts around sponsorship. Mandatory pre-application and pre-arrival training should be offered, ideally complemented by core training for all volunteers, which includes several expectation management elements:

Volunteers should be encouraged to avoid terms like “our refugees”, which assumes a lack of agency and individuality. Volunteers should be helped to focus on empowerment and support rather than ownership or possession.

Exploring the situations which cause someone to flee their country of origin, and providing more detailed resources on trauma and mental health such as *Understanding the Emotional Journey of Refugees*² helps to break down volunteer assumptions about what it is to be a ‘refugee’ and what support is needed.

Introducing the social systems and authorities that volunteers and families will interact with extensively in later stages of the sponsorship journey helps to set the early expectation that volunteers will hold this knowledge and can empower refugees to access these systems independently, setting reasonable expectations about the integration journey.

Shortly before arrival, but after most of the pre-arrival arrangements have been made, mandatory training should allow volunteers to move towards more flexible expectations of the post-arrival experience. Given that initial volunteer expectations are often focused around actually welcoming a refugee or family, this is an important time to again discuss what is realistic.

1 <https://training-resetuk.org/tag/experts-by-experience/>

2 <https://training-resetuk.org/mental-health/understanding-the-emotional-journey-of-refugees/>

Pre-arrival contact

Families waiting years to be relocated may feel a significant loss of agency and control. Facilitating pre-arrival contact³ and having a sponsorship group ask them about simple things like what sort of pillow they prefer, or what groceries they would like when they arrive can help build a collaborative approach to understanding one another and either break down volunteers' remaining assumptions or contextualize them in a meaningful way around the individuals they are welcoming. Pre-arrival contact can also help volunteers know just how autonomous the refugees they are welcoming can be from the start, helping them to measure expectations about support, empowerment and integration.

POST-ARRIVAL: MENTAL HEALTH, EMPOWERMENT AND BOUNDARIES

Days into the initial post-arrival phase, when the sponsorship relationship develops quickly and expectations can be heavily challenged, both hosts and those hosted can go through significant emotional highs and lows as they adjust to their new lives and roles. Until this point, pre-arrival preparation is only hypothetical; suddenly volunteers must take the knowledge they have built up and apply it to the unique circumstances of the family. This can lead to uncertainty and anxiety. At the same time, it occurs in the context of volunteers' original motivations and desires of providing person-to-person support for vulnerable refugees, potentially refocusing earlier expectations in the context of actual sponsorship. A few critical concepts can help to reframe expectations and allow volunteers to focus on what is needed in the moment.

Trauma and mental health

Research tells us that refugees are five times more likely than the UK population to experience mental health problems. Trauma and how it can manifest is often not well understood by volunteers, making training essential to identifying and addressing mental health support that is needed as it arises. Sometimes these challenges can manifest in ways that can feel disheartening to volunteers, where they struggle to understand why their heartfelt efforts are not being received the way they expect.

Volunteers should understand that it is not their role to diagnose or treat mental health problems but, rather, to signpost refugees to different professional services that can help if they express the need. Making hosts more aware of the possible underlying challenges faced by those hosted is critical to resetting their expectations, refocusing their efforts, and directing them to the resources that can help them navigate mental health and trauma effectively.

Empowerment

Integrating into a new country, or community, is a very personal process and it is impossible to put a universal timescale on how long it will take for someone to feel truly integrated or what integration actually means to them. At the same time, volunteers may have strong opinions on what integration is needed, how long it should take, and whether the families they welcome are integrating at a reasonable pace.

Volunteers should be helped to understand integration as a journey which they are helping refugees to progress along without being able to control how integrated an individual will feel at any given time. Volunteers should work to empower refugees to make decisions for themselves and set their own goals. The point of sponsorship is to offer refugees all the tools they need to build their own lives.

Setting Boundaries

Setting boundaries is about setting expectations that are understood in the same way from the perspective of the volunteer group and refugees they welcome. They can include things like establishing times when the group is available for non-emergency situations, whether gifts between volunteers and family are acceptable, and whether a group of volunteers will interact with a family or refugees individually or collectively. Volunteers may perceive what they are doing as a service; others as support. However volunteers choose to think about this, what is crucial is the consistent manner in which the volunteers offer this.

3 <https://training-resetuk.org/resettlement/pre-arrival-contact-guidance/>

Those hosted may have their own boundaries, and it's important to encourage volunteers to discuss these boundaries regularly to ensure they keep in mind that this is a two-way relationship that they are creating, and that this will change over time. Setting early and adaptable boundaries help to provide consistent support towards meaningful integration outcomes.

POST-SPONSORSHIP: PREPARING TO MOVE ON

Integration⁴ doesn't just happen; it's an ongoing process. Just as it's important to support volunteers through exploring their expectations of supporting a family when they arrive, they should be supported to explore and discuss their expectations of the relationship that they will have when the official sponsorship period has ended. Volunteers should be encouraged to discuss what their capacities and motivations will be at this point, including what those hosted may need in terms of continued support, what capacity the group has to support them, whether certain support can be withdrawn to encourage empowerment, and what sort of signposting to other organizations will be needed for those who still need it after the initial sponsorship period has ended.

Setting realistic expectations about volunteers' capacity long term is crucial to avoiding later conversations that may be surprising and upsetting for volunteers or refugees who had different expectations about how the relationship would evolve. This training should therefore be provided at an early stage.

RESOURCES/FURTHER READING:

- <https://training-resetuk.org/group-management/managing-volunteers/>
- <https://training-resetuk.org/tag/experts-by-experience/>
- <https://training-resetuk.org/mental-health/understanding-the-emotional-journey-of-refugees/>
- <https://training-resetuk.org/resettlement/pre-arrival-contact-guidance/>
- <https://training-resetuk.org/integration/introduction-integration/>

Reset UK is a charity formed in 2018 to grow the Community Sponsorship movement in the UK which trains and supports volunteers across the UK to prepare to welcome refugees and to help them settle and integrate once they arrive. Reset UK also works with local authorities and other organisations to support volunteers in making community-led welcome happen.

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For more information on managing the expectations of sponsorship communities contact Reset UK at enquiries@resetuk.org.

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⁴ <https://training-resetuk.org/integration/introduction-integration/>