



Share Network
WELCOME & INTEGRATION OF MIGRANTS & REFUGEES

Engaging Cities and Regions in Community Sponsorship:

Conclusions and Next Steps

Conference on Regions and Cities as Sponsors

Background

A leading example of regional engagement is the Auzolana (Basque for 'Welcome') pilot community sponsorship initiative that was launched in March 2019 to welcome five Syrian families in Basque municipalities: Bilbao, Arrigorriaga, Portugalete, Andoain and Vitoria-Gasteiz. **The initiative is the first community sponsorship programme, organised and led by a regional government.** The programme counts on the active participation of the UNHCR, the Spanish State Secretariat for Migration, civil society actors from Caritas Diocesana in Bilbao, Andoain and Gasteiz, and the Ignacio Ellacuría Social Foundation in Arrigorriaga and Portugalete; as well as local sponsorship volunteering groups which accompany the families' welcoming and settlement process, while coordinating integration efforts with the municipalities where refugees are hosted.

The Share Network in partnership with the Basque Government organises a Regions and Cities as Sponsors Conference as well a Look and Learn visit in Bilbao (Spain), on 15 - 17 June 2022. Hosted by the Basque Government at one of its premises in Bilbao, the event was attended by over 60 participants from nine different European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the UK) to learn and reflect upon the Basque, Valencia and Navarra experiences in building successful multi-stakeholder community sponsorship programmes. Participants included representatives of European cities and regions, national administrations, NGOs, volunteers and solidarity networks, as well as other relevant stakeholders.

Engaging Cities and Regions in Community Sponsorship: Conclusions and Next Steps

Further engaging regions and cities, under varied partnerships and programmes, can allow community sponsorship programmes to grow and become more sustainable. This requires a more structured approach to the engagement of regions and cities as 'co-sponsors'. To this extent, structured outreach, exchange and training must be organised between regions, cities and civil society.

Benefits for regions and cities engaging in sponsorships

The conference highlighted several benefits for regions and cities to directly engage in community sponsorship programmes:

- Community sponsorship represents **solidarity and a joint effort** between public institutions, social initiatives and citizens in addressing refugee movements from third countries.
- It offers regions and cities, a **direct role** in designing and supporting safe and legal refugee admissions, offering community welcome and facilitating local integration.
- Community sponsorships offers cities and regions a tangible way to take a direct stance against the often-negative national narrative surrounding migration, offering a **‘whole of society approach.’**
- Sponsorships can be used as a vehicle to express solidarity with refugees and countries in crisis, **that can be mobilised for varied contexts** (e.g. Afghans, Ukrainians, asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors etc.).
- Community sponsorships allows regions and cities to engage in **strengthening local partnerships and community bonds**. There is a **‘Not one size fits all’** approach regarding this, since engagement can include offering financial support, public support for refugee protection and volunteer engagement, support in identifying housing solutions, support with monitoring and evaluations, etc.
- Supporting community sponsorships strengthens **social cohesion**: the multitude and variety of actors involved in the process of welcoming and integrating a refugee family is the strength of community sponsorship programmes.
- Community sponsorships can offer a **response to an overburdened central government-led reception system**
- Cities and regions can embrace arriving refugees, offering welcome and social activities, to **foster a sense of belonging**.
- Through supporting community sponsorships, political leaders can play the role of ‘champion’ **paving the way for other regions and cities to follow suit**.

Regionally implemented programmes

The Spanish sponsorship programmes show that **regional governments**, working with civil society, can act as **co-sponsors of the programme**, providing regional government funding, coordination and monitoring and evaluation support.

In view of **multi-level governance** in migration, the national government is and should be actively engaged in all programmes.

While the Spanish programme focuses on administrative autonomous regions, more **informal territorial (regional) based partnerships**, are likewise efficient ways to develop and strengthen community sponsorship partnerships. For example, in Ireland, **Regional Support Offices (RSOs)** recruit sponsorship groups in a specific area (North, South, East, West), and offer support through training and day-to-day assistance for refugee families and volunteer sponsors. They also act as a mediator between civil society groups and the government. In North Devon, **a regional lead** engages with stakeholders on the territory, ensuring coordination and troubleshooting, as well as capacity building and engagement with local authorities. This regional lead also engages with the national level, as part of a **lead sponsor network**, which helps steering and advising the Home Office on community sponsorship.

Challenges of resettlement-based community sponsorship programmes

Multi-level governance in administering community sponsorship programmes can best be addressed via **multi stakeholder cooperation frameworks**. **Coordination and communication** between the

national and the regional/local levels is often deficient, hampering growth of decentralised engagement.

To avoid deception upon arrival, **pre-departure information** provision to arriving refugees and local communities must be improved. Refugees should be made aware of the differences between government-led resettlement programmes and civil society/ regionally organised community sponsorship programmes and allowed to make an informed decision between the two programmes.

Regions or cities and national governments must collaborate in developing pre-departure cultural orientation. There is a need for better **matching (vulnerable)** refugees to municipalities particularly when settling in rural and more remote areas. Matching should also take account of special needs, (higher) education and future employment opportunities.

Additionally, the transition to, and **end of the sponsorship period**, is often not sufficiently prepared for and coordinated for with social services and mainstream service providers. This can disrupt transition to longer term affordable housing.

Next Steps

➤ **Need for awareness raising and outreach**

The participants agreed that community sponsorship programmes are often not very visible at the municipal and regional level. Regions and cities have a limited understanding about operational frameworks of community sponsorship and the different ways they can engage and form partnership under such programmes.

Engagement from regions and cities must thus be actively promoted via awareness raising, peer-exchange and training. **Networks of cities and regions** can play a role to raise awareness and transfer knowledge. **Refugees themselves can play an important role as advocates for the programme.**

➤ **Need for best practice exchange**

There is a need to strengthen regional and local community sponsorship communities of practices and establish frameworks for exchange and communication between programme stakeholders. Networks of sponsors are an efficient way to spread the word, support one another and advocate for more sponsorship.

➤ **Need for recruitment strategies that ensure diverse volunteer groups**

Community sponsorship allows for wide volunteer engagement in terms of age, gender and thematic expertise. To ensure close links with regions and cities, **volunteer groups can include city officials and political representatives** as volunteers or patrons, to strengthen links and cooperation.

Groups should focus on **employment** and access to the labour market from the outset, using networks and links with local employers.

Groups should encourage the **participation of previously welcomed refugees** to take part in new welcoming groups.

➤ Engagement of municipalities

Early engagement with municipalities is key for the success of sponsorship programmes. Cities and regions **that already work on successful refugee inclusion programmes** are the most evident partners to facilitate and support community sponsorship.

Local authorities that govern migration through established cooperation with civil society **can respond better to new situations**. While the local level is crucial for any integration programme, local authorities alone have limited room for action. Multi-level and multi-actor governance approaches can foster a beneficial bottom-up approach.

Securing **housing** is a challenge common to all countries, requiring close relations between local authorities and sponsorship groups to seek solutions.

➤ Employment partnerships for early labour market integration

Engagement with employment services and local employers should be part of programmes from the outset, requiring early engagement. Locally embedded organisations have the networks and know the needs and opportunities best.

Smaller cities and rural territories as well as neighbourhoods within big cities can be more easily mobilised.

Securing employment can at times be also easier in **middle and smaller-sized towns**. Rural territories that are losing population can use migration as a constructive way or tool for [rural revitalisation](#) to ensure employment and retain services. This requires careful matching and management of expectations of volunteer sponsors and refugees themselves.

➤ Ukraine responses and sponsorships

The Ukraine crisis has allowed many cities to develop and pilot new models of welcome, delivering **fast and flexible support**. The lessons learned from, notably, citizen housing initiatives and the management of volunteers should influence community sponsorship programmes, just as the key lessons from the latter (vetting of sponsors, matching, safeguarding, training, providing ongoing support and possibilities for peer learning) should inform the new models of welcome piloted for Ukrainians. This has been reconfirmed by the European Commission who published their [Safe Home Guidance](#) one month after the conference (July 2022). The Share Network presented its work on community-led initiatives during the EC launch of the Safe Home Initiative and has been actively following up on its developments.

Case examples from Belgium, Spain, Ireland and UK, show that Ukraine responses have been more efficient when **building upon pre-established regional, city and civil society partnerships** that can better adapt to new needs, using **existing tools and support networks** while expanding communities of practices to new actors. There is a need for **partnerships and communities of practice** to cooperate in ensuring screening, safeguarding and quality control of volunteers and citizen housing initiatives, while planning for phasing out of emergency support to longer-term housing solutions and integration. These should adapt to the special needs of displaced Ukrainians, who are mainly women, minors and smaller children

Hosting and early integration initiatives should also be **inclusive**, avoiding discrimination of other refugee groups and seeking to expand welcome and benefits to all.