

SPONSORSHIP IN THE UK'S SOUTHWEST: AN EXAMPLE OF PLACE-BASED SPONSORSHIP IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Interview with Susannah Baker from the Pickwell Foundation

Engaging rural communities in sponsorship programmes is often seen as challenging due to the general attitude towards change and diversity often attributed to them. Yet, a different narrative is possible, and the work conducted by dedicated community members in the North Devon area of the UK proves it.





Susannah is one of the founders and trustees of the [Pickwell Foundation](#), a grant-making charity born out of the social engagement of two families who support organizations and groups working with displaced persons and/or climate change. Community Sponsorship is one of their priorities.

"We first heard of community sponsorship from a friend connected to the Home Office back in 2016 and we realized straight away that we wanted to be directly involved with that" Susannah tells us. "At the time, all the great organizations that now work on community sponsorship in the UK, such as CHARIS and RESET, did not exist" she adds. *"It was just us and the Home Office, without any intermediaries"*.

Their motivation was so strong that they immediately created a group, gathering 12 people from the local faith community and a book club. After one year of preparations during which everyone took the roles and responsibilities they felt more comfortable with, they were ready to welcome their first family: Khadeja, Mahmoud and their three children.

Becoming a lead sponsor: how does Community Sponsorship in North Devon concretely work, under the umbrella of the Pickwell Foundation?

The Pickwell Foundation's engagement with community sponsorship did not stop with the arrival of the first group. They had a clear vision of the direction they wanted to take, and this led them to become a local "principal sponsor" (lead sponsor) that underwrites the groups wanting to sponsor, supports them in the process, and is also engaged in recruiting new groups willing to welcome refugee families. The Foundation currently manages seven groups, out of which only two are still waiting to welcome new arrivals. *"We have been very lucky with the groups"*, Susannah affirms, *"for they are made up of skilled and engaged volunteers and there is a lot of mutual support, which is great"* she concludes.

While the Foundation do meet with all volunteers and families to build trusting relationships, their degree of involvement changes according to the level of independence each group want to achieve. They also have a reporting system in line with the requirements set by the Home Office and they try to be always updated about how everyone is doing via online and in person meetings. Finally, all the groups participate in trainings and workshops offered by RESET



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and Citizens UK, which provide a great support both to the volunteers and the lead sponsor.

Place-based recruitment of volunteer sponsors, tailored to local needs and capacities

The Foundation recruits new volunteer groups based on geographical gaps and by drawing on the networks and experience of groups that have recently welcomed refugees. Based on the experience of these groups and through social media, they mobilize other volunteers interested in hosting refugee families. *"There is a definite 'glow' period when the groups are at their most excited in anticipating the family's arrival or at their most emotional from recently receiving the family from the airport. This is the ideal time to set up the next group"*, Susannah says. Using a very transparent approach, they explain to interested groups what community sponsorship is about, the challenges involved and how they will be supported throughout the process. It is also important for them not to push volunteers to get involved.

Volunteers are usually people who have been looking for a way to help out for a long time, *"we just offer them a way to do it in a way that is convenient, close to home and life affirming"*, explains Susannah. In addition, the Pickwell foundation also take the housing market into account when deciding where to implement programmes to ensure that refugee families can afford housing and that their situation is sustainable in the future.

Each of the groups formed then needs to fundraise 9000 pounds, the minimum amount designated by the Home Office. These funds, collected ahead of the families' arrival, are used to support the families in covering their basic needs during the first year, such as school uniforms for children, a computer, new furniture or home appliances, medicines, and interpreters (if needed). Rent for the first two years is taken care of by the monthly income received from the Government. However, the responsibility for finding accommodation still lies with the groups (and the Foundation) – a difficult task in North Devon, a popular holiday destination. Because of this challenge of finding accommodation, the Pickwell Foundation organized itself as a social landlord a few years ago and has joined with other social landlords to create a network of positive stories in the Southwest. Together with the social



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landlords network, they are calling on other socially minded landlords to join them and consider renting out their properties to refugees as well.

Engaging in advocacy with the lead sponsor network and staying connected to the community

Besides accompanying the families in their integration journey, the groups and the Foundation are also heavily involved in advocacy and campaigning. *"It is tiring, but it needs to be done continually in this sector"* Susannah tells us. They were for instance involved in a major campaign in the UK in 2020 to re-start the community sponsorship programme interrupted due to the pandemic. They have also held numerous meetings on the expansion of the Community Sponsorship programme and have engaged in discussions on the reception of Afghan refugees.

As part of 'The Lead Sponsors Network', they can directly speak and ask questions to the Home Office about their future plans. Set up by [RESET](#) (The UK's community sponsorship learning hub), this Network counts on the participation of committed lead sponsor organizations in the UK who currently manage several sponsor groups. As a collective and powerful voice, they campaign together, share ideas and discuss new policies. Susannah recognized that thanks to the support of local authorities in the Southwest of England, there are fewer barriers to their growth than in other areas. The Pickwell Foundation also ensures that it is well connected with the wider local community. For example, it distributes a monthly newsletter to an audience of around 200 people to share stories and sponsorship initiatives, in the hope of keeping the commitment alive and perhaps involving more groups by word of mouth. Khadeja, a sponsored refugee and now an employee of the Foundation, is responsible for this and other tasks.

"I will do my part to make community sponsorship a reality where I live", Susannah tells us with determination. *"At times it can be very challenging emotionally and practically, especially with Covid-19"* she adds, *"but it is mostly extremely rewarding"* she concludes.



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