

Community Sponsorship Ireland

A Guide for Prospective Sponsors

Introduction

The number of people worldwide who have been forcibly displaced is currently at an all-time high of 79.5 million. The vast majority of these people have either moved within their own country, or have fled to a neighbouring country. Developing countries hosted 85% of the world's refugees and Venezuelans displaced abroad, with the Least Developed Countries providing asylum to 27% of the total.

Many refugees have no prospect of returning home safely in the foreseeable future; the situation in the country where they have sought protection may also be perilous or they may have specific needs that cannot be addressed there. In such circumstances, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, may refer their cases to other countries who will consider admitting them by way of resettlement to enable them to restart their lives. Ireland is one such country and it has committed to offer safety and protection to approx. 2,900 people through its resettlement programme between 2020-2023.

Communities across Ireland are being asked to play an important and direct role in this resettlement process. Through community sponsorship, they will be encouraged to come together to show solidarity with those affected by war and persecution and to assume responsibility for welcoming them to their community. Community groups will themselves be provided with training and support so that they feel empowered with the knowledge and skills to effectively assist refugees coming to Ireland to build a new life in a safe and welcoming environment.

This guide explains how community sponsorship works, the obligations of sponsors and the application process involved should your community group wish to play a part in welcoming refugees to Ireland.

What is Community Sponsorship?

Community sponsorship started in Canada in the 1970s. Unlike traditional refugee resettlement models, where the State or State-supported actors provide settlement and integration services directly to refugees, community sponsorship invites members of the public to play a key role in the delivery of these supports. It has been shown that community sponsored refugees tend to have relatively early, positive integration and settlement outcomes, thanks in large part to the social support they receive from sponsors. Canada has resettled more than 300,000 refugees since its community sponsorship programme began and now a number of other countries including the UK, Argentina, New Zealand, Spain and Germany, are replicating the success of that programme in the unique context of their national systems.

Under such programmes, private citizens and community organisations, rather than government officials, become the face of welcome for resettled refugees arriving to their country. In Ireland, communities are supported to provide direct assistance to refugees settling in their locality through a structured programme backed by a unique collaboration between government, UNHCR, NGOs and civil society. Sponsors commit to provide social and emotional support to refugees over a specific period of time, to source suitable housing and help them to find employment, learn the local language, enrol in schools and more; they play a key role in introducing them to state services and social and professional networks in the new community in which they have settled. For communities,

such programmes are a great way to build broader awareness of refugee-related issues and to help promote understanding and intercultural exchanges. Often both sponsors and refugees have a life-changing and enriching experience, and both in Ireland and abroad it has been shown to bring communities together.

Community sponsorship began in Ireland on a pilot basis in 2018 and by the close of 2019, 30 resettled refugees had been welcomed by different communities across Ireland. The programme was officially launched in November 2019 following its pilot phase and is now fully operational and in a position to accept applications from community groups on an ongoing basis. It is hoped that 100 refugees would be welcomed annually via community sponsorship between 2020 and 2023.

What is resettlement and how does it work?

Resettlement involves the selection and transfer of refugees from a state in which they have sought protection to a third state that has agreed to admit them - as refugees - with permanent residence status. The status provided by this third resettlement state ensures protection against return to their country of origin where they will be at risk of persecution. The resettled refugee and his/her family or dependents will be provided with access to civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals. Resettlement also carries with it the opportunity to eventually become a naturalised citizen of the resettlement country.

In 2023 the number of people in need of resettlement is estimated to be more than 2 million. However, the number of places available falls far short of this, with just over 63,000 persons transferred on resettlement in 2021¹. Community sponsorship schemes, such as Ireland's, play an important role in expanding the capacity of states to provide resettlement places.

Any person or family that is being considered for resettlement will have already been registered with UNHCR and declared a refugee based on an individual assessment. Resettlement is a measure of last resort and eligibility is based on precise criteria by reference to protection needs and potential vulnerabilities. UNHCR's Resettlement Submission Categories include: Legal and/or Physical Protection Needs; Survivors of Torture and/ or Violence; Medical Needs; Women and Girls at Risk; Family Reunification; Children and Adolescents at Risk; and Lack of Foreseeable Alternative Durable Solutions.

The final decision to accept a refugee for resettlement remains with the resettlement country, not UNHCR. States are provided with detailed fact sheets on the persons referred and are facilitated to interview resettlement candidates and to conduct security screening. In the case of the Irish resettlement programme, each candidate is the subject of a Garda security assessment and interview, the checking of fingerprints against national and international databases and pre-departure health screening.

The refugee resettlement programme in Ireland has been in operation since 2000 and is run by the Irish Government in collaboration with UNHCR. Between 2000 and 2019, over 3,000 refugees of approximately 30 different nationalities were resettled to Ireland. In

¹ [UNHCR: 2023 Projected Global Resettlement Needs](#)

December 2019, the Irish Government committed to a new refugee protection programme, to expand its community sponsorship programme and to increase its annual resettlement quota by 50 each year over the next four years: 650 in 2020, 700 in 2021, 750 in 2022 and 800 in 2023.

As refugees admitted to Ireland have already been determined by UNHCR to meet the definition of a refugee, they are not required to apply for refugee status in Ireland upon arrival. Their rights are set out in the International Protection Act 2015. Under section 59 of that Act, a resettled refugee may also be termed a 'programme refugee'.² In most respects, including education, employment and social protection, they have the same rights and entitlements as Irish citizens upon arrival. They will become eligible to apply to become naturalised Irish citizens after three years.

Who is eligible to be resettled via the Community Sponsorship Programme?

Referrals to Community Sponsorship Ireland will be made via existing procedures already in place for the government-managed resettlement programme. Persons eligible for this programme will be refugees who currently reside outside of Ireland and who have been identified by UNHCR and accepted by the Irish government as individuals who are in need of resettlement. The individuals selected will also be asked to agree to participate in this programme and to provide written consent to share basic information with sponsors in order to be part of a community sponsorship programme.

In December 2019, the Irish government committed to resettling up to 2,900 refugees under the second phase of the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (2020-2023), including via community sponsorship. In accordance with this pledge it was expected that arrivals would largely comprise Syrian refugees resident in Jordan and Lebanon, along with a pilot group of 150 Eritrean refugees resident in Ethiopia. Significant challenges arose in meeting these targets over the course of 2020 and 2021, with the impact of the COVID-9 pandemic and the IRPP's support for the arrival of almost 550 refugees from Afghanistan following the crisis in September 2021.

Who can submit a Community Sponsorship application?

Participation in community sponsorship is voluntary and applications are open to all kinds of community groups, including local community groups, faith groups, businesses, neighbours, charities etc.

Engaging in community sponsorship is a substantial undertaking requiring the assumption of a significant responsibility. A Community Sponsorship Group (CSG) must consider all aspects of their commitment before applying.

In order to submit an application your group must consider and demonstrate the following:

- Your group must comprise a minimum core group of five people (a primary and secondary sponsor and a minimum of three additional CSG support personnel), all of whom must be over 18. They should have an interest in other cultures, respect for diversity and a demonstrated connection to their community.

² [Irish Statute Book: International Protection Act 2015, Section 59](#)

- Each member of the group must be legally resident in Ireland.
- Your group must find a Regional Support Organisation (RSO) who will advise you in preparing your application and be available to provide help and support to your group throughout the sponsorship period. Participation in the programme depends on the availability of an RSO with sufficient capacity to work with your group. A list of approved RSOs can be found at Appendix A.
- Your group must nominate a Primary Sponsor who will assume responsibility for applying for approval to become sponsors in the first instance, and if approved, for leading the co-ordination and the delivery of the sponsorship commitments. He/she will be the primary point of contact for the CSG.
- Your group must also nominate a Secondary Sponsor who will support the Primary Sponsor in the co-ordination and the delivery of the sponsorship commitments. He/she will be the primary point of contact when the Primary Sponsor is unavailable.
- CSG support personnel are people who will play a regular or significant role in the delivery of settlement supports to the family. While friends and family may also help you on an occasional basis, it's important for safeguarding reasons that you identify everyone you anticipate will be playing a regular or significant role in the delivery of supports.
- Your group should include individuals with a range of skill sets so that a varied level of experience is covered. For example, someone with language skills; someone with experience in education, employment, financial supports; and someone who has experience in working in an intercultural context or supporting vulnerable people would all be beneficial. In your Settlement Plan you will be asked to designate who has responsibility for each area.
- Your group must agree to undergo training delivered by your RSO in advance of the commencement of the programme.
- Your group must commit to raising a minimum of €10,000 to support a sponsored family, of which a maximum of €2,000 may be in-kind contributions. In your application you will be asked to provide details on how you plan to raise funds to support the implementation of your Settlement Plan and to cater for unexpected eventualities.

How long is the Community Sponsorship Group commitment?

Your CSG will be expected to commit to sponsor a refugee family for a period of eighteen months and to ensure that housing is secured for the family for a minimum period of two years.

Sponsoring means your CSG will provide all necessary supports to the family during the initial period of their resettlement in Ireland and assist the family's successful integration into your community.

What are the responsibilities of a Community Sponsorship Group?

Community Sponsorship does not curtail in any way the existing rights and entitlements of resettled refugees to access state services. The legal rights of resettled refugees are set out in Section 59 of the International Protection Act 2015.³ As mentioned above, resettled refugees have a right to legal residence upon arrival and in most respects, including education, employment and social protection, they have the same rights and entitlements as Irish citizens. They become eligible to apply for naturalisation after three years.

How Community Sponsorship Ireland differs from traditional resettlement is that, rather than being offered initial accommodation in an Emergency Reception and Orientation Centre (EROC), sponsored refugees will go directly to the community to begin the process of resettlement. Your CSG will meet them in the airport on day one to welcome them to Ireland and bring them to their new home where you will help them to get set up and provide some initial orientation. Groups also help newcomer refugees to register with the appropriate authorities and introduce them to essential state services covering basic needs in areas such as health, education, and social protection. You will also need to ensure that appropriate interpretation services are available as required, particularly during the initial months of the sponsorship commitment period. Your Regional Support Organisation will provide you with the training and support you need to ensure your group is well-prepared to fulfil this role.

In addition to ensuring access to key services and entitlements, your CSG will play a vital role in helping refugees to become independent and to develop the capacity to participate fully in Irish life. In other words you will be asked to promote positive integration outcomes for the refugees you welcome to your community. Integration in this context is understood as the: “ability to participate to the extent that a person needs and wishes in all of the major components of society without having to relinquish his or her own cultural identity.”⁴ In particular, you will be required to support and enable them to:

- Interact with the local community and participate in cultural, sporting and other activities while preserving also their own traditions as they wish.
- Celebrate their national, ethnic, cultural and religious identities.
- Develop language skills sufficient to enable them to participate in economic life and in the wider society.
- Access and navigate public services with confidence.
- Access education appropriate to their needs and capacities.
- Participate in economic life – in employment and self-employment.
- Become full and active members of the community and Irish society.

³ [Irish Statute Book: International Protection Act 2015, Section 59](#)

⁴ [justice.ie: The Migrant Integration Strategy](#)

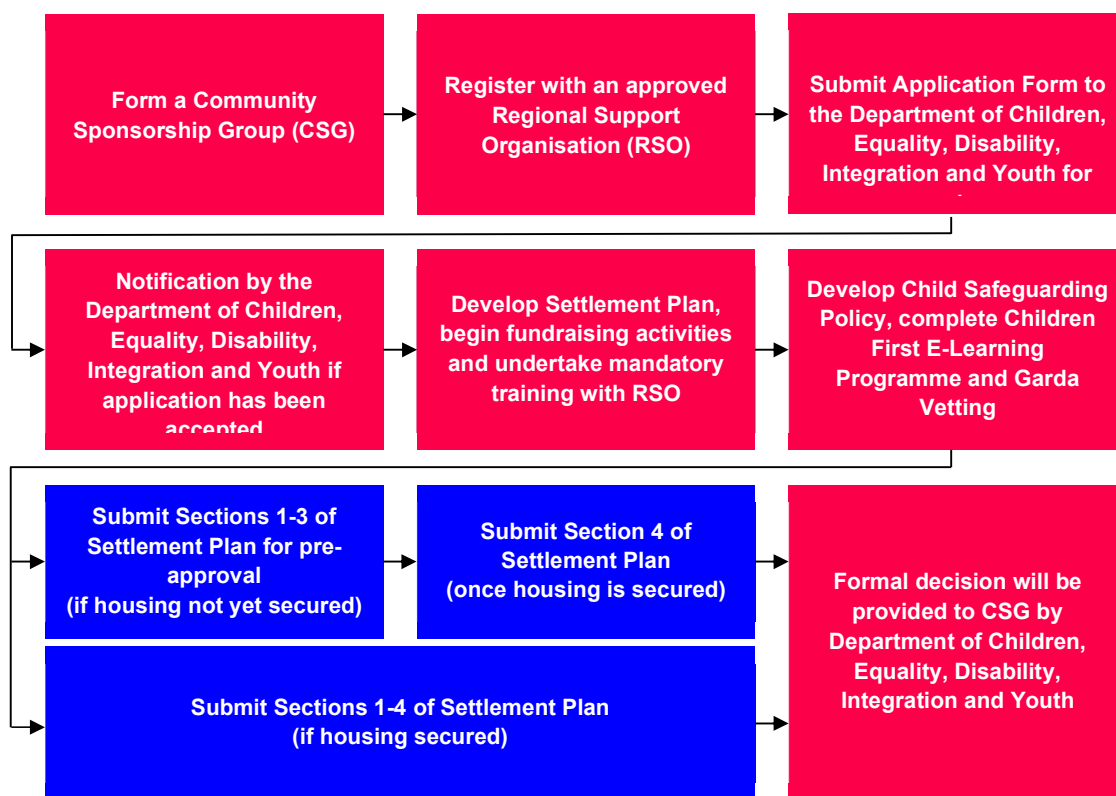
Your group will be asked to plan in detail for the provision of these supports and to demonstrate your preparations through the submission of a settlement plan. Your RSO will also help you with this and provide you with initial feedback when you have completed it. Every household will need different kinds and levels of support and your CSG must be prepared to adapt as it plans to support refugees arriving to their community.

I'm interested in applying, what are the next steps?

If you would like to apply to become a sponsor under the Community Sponsorship Programme, the first thing to do is to find like-minded individuals who wish to apply with you and to contact a RSO near you to see if they are willing and have the capacity to support your group. For a full list of RSOs see Appendix A.

The Application Process

In order to become a sponsor under the Community Sponsorship Initiative, you will be required to undertake the following steps before being approved to sponsor a newcomer family:



1. Come together as a group of 5 or more to form a CSG; nominate a primary and secondary sponsor and determine the roles the other members of the group will have.

2. Register your initial expression of interest with an approved Regional Support Organisation (RSO). An RSO is a sponsorship support organisation who will provide training, advice, and guidance and will support you to develop your application.
3. Complete and submit to your RSO and later the Department an application form. The form will include plans for fundraising and a sponsorship undertaking whereby all members of the group commit to meet the obligations of the programme.
4. Your group will receive formal notification that your application form has been accepted by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.
5. Your group should begin developing your Settlement Plan, start your planned fundraising activities and participate in mandatory training to be arranged by your RSO.
6. All group members must complete Tusla's Children First e-learning module, available free online. A digital certificate is provided on completion of this module. All group members must also undergo Garda vetting. This will be facilitated by your RSO. Complete a group Child Safeguarding Policy that outlines your group's policies and procedures to mitigate harm and risk of harm to children under the supervision of your group or at events held by your group. Your RSO will be able to support you with this. Please note that each group is required to nominate an independent Designated Liaison Person, who will be a member of your RSO, and a safeguarding liaison person within the group.
7. Complete and submit a detailed Settlement Plan to your RSO, explaining how you plan to support a newcomer household. Your RSO will be able to provide feedback and advise of any necessary amendments before it is submitted to the Department. The CSG's Child Safeguarding Policy, evidence of funds raised, Children First E-Learning certificates and confirmation that all group members have been Garda vetted must be submitted to the Department alongside the Settlement Plan.
8. If you do not have a housing solution available at the time of submission of the Settlement Plan, you may submit Sections 1 – 3 of the Settlement Plan for approval and submit Section 4 once you have secured suitable accommodation. A formal decision can only be made once suitable accommodation has been secured.
9. Once all sections of the Settlement Plan have been reviewed by your RSO and submitted to the Department, your group will receive formal notification from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth that your Settlement Plan has been accepted. At that stage, your group will wait to be notified if you have been matched to a refugee family and of their anticipated arrival date.

Financial Commitment and Fundraising

As mentioned above, when submitting their Settlement Plan, sponsors are required to demonstrate that they have a minimum of €10,000 on hand to support a sponsored family, of which a maximum of €2,000 may be in-kind contributions (e.g. a commitment given to provide professional interpretation services, English classes, child care etc. free of charge).

Refugees are entitled to access a range of social welfare benefits on the basis of the same eligibility criteria as Irish citizens. Applications can be made in person at your local Intreo Centre or Department of Social Protection.⁵ In the first few months after arrival, the family will typically require a range of financial supports, including to cover expenses such as food, medical expenses, clothing and educational materials, including books and school uniforms etc. Depending on their individual circumstances, some refugee households may qualify for supplementary or discretionary welfare schemes, such as the Exceptional Needs Payments.

CSGs are expected to demonstrate that they have fully considered the needs and requirements of a family and to plan financial needs accordingly. Additional funding may also be required to ensure that the refugee family can participate fully, to the extent they wish to, in local society and community activities. However, this provision of support should be balanced with the ultimate goal of the family becoming financially and otherwise self-sufficient by the end of the sponsorship period.

Financial Planning

Essential criteria

- A draft budget should be prepared initially to project monthly expenditure.
- A fundraising plan must be drawn up and set out in your Application Form.
- A minimum of €10,000 fundraised (of which up to €2,000 may be committed by way of in-kind contributions). This is to be held in a secure account with a minimum of two signatories to be drawn down, as required, over the duration of the community sponsorship period.

Meeting the criteria

- **Prepare an initial budget**
Examine the areas that your CSG will be responsible for and how you plan to address this over the course of the sponsorship period. When preparing your budget take into account which resources can be provided in-kind, through donations and which can be covered by social welfare until such time as family members access employment. You will also need to ensure contingency for any additional or unforeseen costs such as urgent dental work, or any special needs the family might have. Back to Education supports for children and adults should also be fully researched and planned for (e.g. childcare arrangements while parents attend classes). You may also need to factor in delays in accessing certain entitlements.
- **Fundraise**

⁵ [gov.ie: Supplementary Welfare Allowance - list of offices administering SWA](https://www.gov.ie/en/publications-and-resources/other/supplementary-welfare-allowance-list-of-offices-administering-swa/)

It is essential to put together a fundraising plan with realistic targets as to how your CSG can reach the financial commitment of this programme. Community Sponsorship is a community endeavour, so your initial fundraising targets should start within your community. This is also a great way to work together towards a common goal and to spread the news about your plans. A broad approach can also be useful, mixing fundraising with donations from local businesses, for example.

- **Evidence of funds**

A dedicated account should be set up for the purposes of administering and holding in trust any funds raised with appropriate oversight and controls established. For instance, a minimum of two co-signatories should be required prior to any withdrawal. Bank statements will need to be submitted along with your Settlement Plan in order to provide evidence that your group has a minimum of €10,000 available (€8,000 where €2,000 is committed by way of in-kind contributions) but also, more generally, sufficient funds to meet the anticipated costs set out in the budget by reference to the overall Settlement Plan.

Safeguarding

Your RSO will assist you in meeting your safeguarding requirements. Children First guidance and legislation must be strictly adhered to in the implementation of community sponsorship. As CSGs are likely to be working with children and vulnerable adults, they are required to:

- Keep children safe from harm while they are using the service and attending events etc. organised by the CSG.
- Complete Garda vetting requirements. The National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012-2016 make it mandatory for people working with children or vulnerable adults to be vetted by the Garda Síochána National Vetting Bureau. You must ensure that all group members are fully vetted to support working with children and vulnerable adults and that they are suitable and of good character. This will be facilitated through your RSO. Successful completion of the vetting process must be submitted along with your Settlement Plan.
- Your group must designate a Child Safeguarding Liaison Person within the CSG.
- All members of the CSG who will have direct contact with the family will be required to complete Tusla's Children First E-Learning Programme.⁶ Proof of completion of the E-Learning Programme must be submitted along with your Settlement Plan.
- The CSG will be required to work with the RSO Designated Liaison Person to develop a Child Safeguarding Policy, which can be based on the existing policies of the RSO and which may rely on its reporting procedures. The Child Safeguarding Policy must be submitted along with your Settlement Plan.

⁶ [Tusla: Children First E-learning Programme](#)

Data protection and privacy

Maintaining the privacy of the resettled family is important; therefore, your CSG must commit to:

- Never share personal information, documentation or data provided by or relating to the family without their informed consent.
- Get informed consent from the resettled family in relation to any proposed media exposure, requests or interest.⁷ Note that resettled refugees are termed 'programme refugees' under section 59 of the International Protection Act 2015.

Your group should inform itself of its statutory obligations more generally with respect to the Data Protection Acts 1988 to 2018, for example, to keep personal data secure or to notify affected parties in the case of a breach.

Settlement Plan

A detailed Settlement Plan is required as part of the application process and should fully consider all aspects of the support and needs of a family. Your CSG's Settlement Plan should demonstrate how your group will deliver community sponsorship to a refugee family. It should set out by who, how, where and when the various aspects of your Settlement Plan will be delivered.

Settlement Planning

Essential criteria

- Development of a detailed Settlement Plan that sufficiently sets out how you will meet the needs of a family, both before and after their arrival.

Meeting the criteria

- **Set out when you will provide the requisite supports for a family**
 - Using the guidance documents available, plan which supports should be provided immediately, and which supports should come later in the process.
- **Ensure you include as much detail as possible in the Settlement Plan**
 - From the beginning it is crucial that you consider where the housing will be and the size of housing available. If you do not have a housing solution available at the time of submission of the Settlement Plan, you may submit Sections 1 – 3 of the Settlement Plan for approval and submit Section 4 once you have secured suitable accommodation. It is recommended that

⁷ [UNHCR Guide - Know Your Rights: Privacy & Engaging with the Media](#)

you only commit to housing once you have almost or fully completed the other sections of the Settlement Plan.

- Consider the types of support needed by a family and detail who will provide these supports.
- Your plan will need to be robust and comprise evidence of how the supports will be provided and by whom. This should include the names and addresses of the individuals and organisations concerned.

- **Get support when required**

- If you do not have the necessary skills and expertise within your group, source and identify additional support from organisations or other individuals who can provide this when required.

- **Build in contingency plans**

- Be prepared for things to go wrong and not according to plan.
- What alternate arrangements have you made in these circumstances?

- **Ensure that your Settlement Plan contains the full list of requirements required by the programme**

This includes:

- Arrival plan
- Orientation – for both local community and family
- Proof of funds
- Safeguarding Policy
- Registration plan (IRP, PPSN etc.)
- Social Welfare support
- Suitable accommodation or a clear plan as to how it will be secured
- Language courses
- School places
- Healthcare access; a G.P. and dentist willing to accept new medical card patients
- Interpretation and translation Services
- Access to employment services

Resources

- » Settlement Plan
- » Guidance for Sponsors' Settlement Planning

How is a match made between a sponsoring group and a refugee family?

You will be formally notified when a family has been matched with your CSG and informed as soon as travel arrangements have been finalised so that you can plan for their arrival.

The Irish Government and UNHCR have responsibility for selecting refugee families who are eligible and suitable for this programme. Consent will be obtained of the families themselves to voluntarily enter into the Community Sponsorship stream of resettlement. Those who do not consent will be provided with resettlement support through the existing resettlement programme managed by the Government and Local Authorities.

A successful sponsorship application will be met, where feasible, with a quick turnaround by the Irish government to ensure the speedy arrival of the refugees into Ireland and to take advantage of the community resources prepared.

A refugee family will be matched to the CSG by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the basis of criteria including:

- The needs of the family (health, medical, educational, employment opportunities etc.) and how the group and their locality can cater to these needs.
- The proposed settlement plan set out by the CSG and how it may address and meet the needs of the refugee family.
- The size of accommodation available in that location to meet the size of the proposed family.

What if something goes wrong? Dealing with relationship difficulties and breakdown.

Experience in other countries suggests that sponsorship breakdown is in fact a very rare occurrence. However, it must be acknowledged that in any community project of this sort difficulties may arise from time to time. In providing training and support, your RSO will do their best to prepare you for the challenges ahead and to deal appropriately with those challenges when they arise. Ultimately, in the case of irreparable breakdown, the State will intervene and reassume responsibility for ensuring that the refugee household in question is appropriately provided for. Before considering such an option, however, all avenues must be exhausted in the community in seeking a resolution to the difficulties. If your group is experiencing difficulties, your RSO will be available to you to offer guidance and support. Your CSG will be expected at all times to make every effort in good faith to prevent a breakdown in the relationship. Where this cannot be prevented, you will be required to work with the RSO to seek a resolution, and enter into mediation where necessary or if requested to do so by either the RSO or the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Additional information

Thank you for your interest in community sponsorship and in helping to support a refugee family as they rebuild their lives in Ireland.

For more information, please contact your nearest RSO or visit theopencommunity.ie.

Appendix A

Approved Regional Support Organisations (RSOs) for Community Sponsorship Ireland include:

Nasc, the Migrant and Refugee Rights Centre,
34 Paul Street,
Cork,
(021) 427 3594
<http://www.nascireland.org>

Irish Red Cross,
16 Merrion Square,
Dublin 2.
(01) 642 4600
<http://www.redcross.ie>

Irish Refugee Council,
37 Killarney Street,
Dublin 1.
(01) 764 5854
<http://www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie>

Doras
Central Buildings,
51a O'Connell Street,
Limerick.
(061) 310328
<http://www.doras.org>

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