

## Research Colloquium on Refugee Sponsorship: Refugee Sponsorship and Public Attitudes Towards Refugees

### Outcomes Document

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The [University of Ottawa Refugee Hub](#) (‘Refugee Hub’) continued its Research Colloquium on Refugee Sponsorship with sixth workshop held on January 18, 2022. The Colloquium involves a series of workshops and symposia held in 2021–2022 drawing upon expertise from many disciplines and around the globe, and is organized with partners from the University of Ottawa, the [Institute for Research into Superdiversity](#) (IRiS) at the University of Birmingham, the [Centre for Refugee Studies](#) at York University, and the University of Toronto. It is funded by the [Alex Trebek Forum for Dialogue](#) and the [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council](#).

This workshop explored two significant ways sponsorship is linked to public attitudes. First, contributors discussed how participation in sponsorship programs is crucially tied to public attitudes about refugees; the ability to recruit and motivate sponsors is closely linked to these attitudes. Second, contributors explored how sponsorship programs have the power to influence public attitudes by increasing support for refugee resettlement.

This event was moderated by Professor Jennifer Bond, Managing Director of the Refugee Hub and Chair of the [Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative](#), and featured a four-member panel of experts:

- Tim Dixon, Co-founder of [More in Common](#)—Keynote Speaker;
- Louisa Taylor, Director of [Refugee613](#)— Discussant;
- Graham Thom, Refugee Coordinator at [Amnesty International](#) (Australia)— Discussant;
- Ali Al Battatt, Ambassador for [My New Neighbour campaign](#) (Australia)— Discussant.

Below, we present key questions, findings, and reflections that emerged from the workshop.

### Tim Dixon – Keynote Presentation

Mr. Dixon began by noting the mission of [More in Common](#), which works on both short and longer term initiatives to address the underlying drivers of fracturing and polarization, and build more united, resilient and inclusive societies. More in Common does this by undertaking and supporting quality research, developing communication strategies and initiatives to unite people and societies.

Mr. Dixon explained why he considers community sponsorship to be one of the greatest opportunities to shift opinions on refugee issues around the world. He noted that More in Common has conducted surveys related to refugee sponsorship across the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. In all three countries, when survey participants were asked if they would support refugee resettlement,

participants were more likely to be in support of resettlement programs if programs included community sponsorship. In the United States, while 49% of participants supported the decision to restore the resettlement program, that number increased to 55% when the program was framed through a community sponsorship lens (for example, resettling refugees with the support of American hosts, churches, and/or neighbourhood groups). In Germany and the United Kingdom, surveys showed similar trends of support. Importantly, in the UK, framing resettlement through a sponsorship lens led to a nearly 10% increase in support from a cohort described by More in Common as ‘Loyal Nationals’ – a key population that is greatly concerned about the potential negative consequences of refugee movements.

More in Common’s findings suggest that sponsorship can shift public opinion in significant and positive ways in support of refugees, and critically that such shifts may be even more significant in populations that tend to oppose refugee resettlement. Mr. Dixon suggested **ten reasons** why a significant number of people feel more comfortable about refugee resettlement when managed it is through community sponsorship:

### **1. Sponsorship is an orderly and managed form of resettlement**

Sponsorship addresses what More in Common surveys show to be the most powerful source of public anxiety about refugees: the concern that a country has lost control of its borders and lacks control over who is entering and staying.

### **2. Sponsorship helps people see refugees not as ‘the Other’ but as ‘people like us’**

The act of sponsoring makes it harder for people to support “us” versus “them” narratives because it puts refugees in direct contact with people in their local community and builds relationships at that grassroots level.

### **3. Sponsorship elevates high-trust messengers**

Since the act of sponsorship is undertaken by people and local communities rather than government, it elevates those members of society who are most trusted: ordinary people. These people become ‘trusted messengers’ who share positive, relatable messages about refugees to others in their networks, and beyond.

### **4. Sponsorship unites and connects people in local communities**

Sponsorship creates powerful stories of collaboration, team spirit and collective effort. For people who fear that migration leads to a loss of community, seeing the revitalizing effects of community sponsorship can change attitudes towards refugees in positive ways.

### **5. Sponsorship changes people**

Behavioural science indicates that changes in behaviour often precede changes in belief. Since sponsorship requires hands-on action from community members, these actions have the power to reshape beliefs.

## **6. Sponsorship connects people through their deepest identities and values**

Sponsorship is often undertaken by groups sharing common identities and values, such as faith groups, students, LGBTQ+, and more. This allows group members to connect with each other and with refugees who share their beliefs/identities/ethos.

## **7. Sponsorship helps integrate newcomers into communities**

Interaction with sponsors helps to introduce refugees to their local communities and build connections. This breaks down negative narratives of refugees as ‘the other’ or as people who do not mix or integrate upon arrival.

## **8. Sponsorship addresses specific concerns about integration**

Sponsorship addresses concerns about language acquisition and refugees learning about a country’s values, culture, and traditions because sponsors take on responsibility for these areas of integration.

## **9. Sponsorship is funded by ordinary people rather than governments**

This counters narratives about refugees as a ‘public burden’ for those who are concerned about costs borne by governments in traditional resettlement schemes.

## **10. Sponsorship generates powerful, personal stories**

Sponsorship generates positive stories about connection in a world of disconnection, which can then be spread to family members, friends, and colleagues. These stories have the power to change attitudes.

## **Discussion**

In the discussion portion of the workshop, Graham Thom and Ali Al Battat shared their experiences from the [My New Neighbour](#) campaign in Australia – organized by Amnesty International – to mobilize communities across the country to advocate for fairer community sponsorship programs for refugees. Campaign ambassadors mobilized communities by sharing stories about sponsorship with local councils, sporting groups, church groups, local newspapers, and other local groups. The result of these efforts was that, when the Australian government began its review of the existing sponsorship program in 2020, a large number of these community groups wrote into the government review expressing support for sponsorship and indicating their keenness to sponsor refugees to their areas. This groundswell of support helped make the case for the Australian government to introduce a new community sponsorship program that is much more affordable and has an ‘unlinked’ element (meaning that community groups and organizations as well as family members of refugees will be able to sponsor people to Australia).

## Removing Participation Barriers

Participants turned the discussion to the importance of removing barriers to participation in sponsorship programs in other locations, including Canada. Louisa Taylor explained that, from a Canadian perspective, removing barriers is essential because community sponsorship has proven to be a very effective protection tool *and* a valuable community-building tool helping to counter anti-refugee messaging. Yet, getting a diverse group of people involved in sponsorship remains a challenge. Discussants stressed the importance of developing sponsorship programs that are robust, accessible, and known to the public. Moments when public attention is focused on refugee crises (for example, public attention on the refugee situation in Afghanistan in 2021) provide important opportunities to strengthen infrastructure, accelerate policy change and improve communication about sponsorship programs. With displacement only increasing due to conflict and climate change, the work being done now to expand community sponsorship may have significant impacts in the future.

## Refugee Participation

Participants emphasized the importance of featuring refugee leadership in sponsorship communication campaigns, which was a technique employed by the My New Neighbour campaign, through the [Ambassadors](#) movement. Participants noted that refugees' journeys and motivations are often misunderstood and misrepresented by others, and as a result their voices should be central in narratives about sponsorship. Newcomers' knowledge and lived experiences are crucial inputs for every stage of a sponsorship program's development and promotion. Additionally, forums and tools of communication or consultation should be adapted to effectively engage refugees by their preferred means.