Expanding Safe Pathways to the UK for Sanctuary Seekers

A framework to guide policy makers

King's College London

Community Sponsorship Alliance

Foreword

At a time when forced migration is too often met with hostility or indifference, this report offers something different: a serious, evidence-based vision for how the UK can respond with both compassion and practicality. It recognises that while government policy is vital, so too is the role of ordinary people - neighbours, communities, volunteers - who are ready to open their doors and walk alongside those seeking safety.

The Community Sponsorship Alliance exists to support and strengthen that response. We've seen first-hand what happens when communities are given the tools and trust to lead: lives are changed, both for those seeking sanctuary and for those who welcome them. That's why we've been proud to co-lead this work, in partnership with the Sanctuary Hub at King's College London and so many others across civil society.

What you'll find in these pages isn't just a policy framework. It's the product of genuine collaboration - between practitioners, academics, people with lived experience, and public servants - brought together by a shared belief that a better way is possible. It sets out what safe pathways could look like if we placed trust in communities, removed unnecessary barriers, and committed to building something sustainable for the long term.

This report is timely, not just because of the political moment we're in, but because the urgency is real. People are waiting. Communities are ready. This framework shows how we might meet one another in that place - and build something better together.

Susannah Baker
Chair, Community Sponsorship Alliance
July 2025

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Executive Summary

The vast majority of people who are forcibly displaced do not have access to safe pathways to sanctuary. Consequently, many resort to dangerous, lengthy, and expensive routes. Current UK legislation only allows sanctuary seekers from a limited number of countries to enter via safe and legal routes. Existing domestic schemes, such community sponsorship and welcome initiatives, provide a vital resettlement pathway and integration support for the most vulnerable that need protection. However, the potential of such a community-led approaches is not being fully realised as part of a more comprehensive approach to expanding access to safe pathways.

This report presents a **safe pathways policy framework** that harnesses the potential of the existing UK community sponsorship scheme to facilitate **community-led safe pathways, inclusion and welcome for sanctuary seekers from anywhere in the world**. The framework outlines the key considerations for developing an evidence-based safe pathways policy that could consolidate existing safe pathways to the UK that removes bureaucratic barriers to community sponsorship..

This policy framework is the outcome of a collaborative academic research project led by the Sanctuary Hub at King's College London and the Community Sponsorship Alliance. The research was conducted in partnership with civil society organisations working in communities across the UK, policy makers in the Home Office and Ministry for Housing and Communities, and people with lived experience of forced migration. The research involved a series of policy workshops to explore the scope of the problem and to develop potential policy pathways.

First, the report reviews evidence on the effectiveness of existing policy. This shows the current deterrence approach does not reduce irregular migration. Instead, it has redirected sanctuary seekers toward more dangerous routes, increased vulnerability to exploitation, and strained public services. Financial analysis reveals that deterrence strategies, such as offshore processing and temporary accommodation, are more costly than safe pathway alternatives. Programmes like Homes for Ukraine and community sponsorship have demonstrated cost-efficiency, public support, and a route that avoids irregular entries. The evidence reviewed advocates for a strategic shift toward compassionate, integration-focused policies and enhanced regional cooperation to expand safe and legal routes. Such an approach would not only uphold the UK's humanitarian commitments but also deliver better outcomes for both sanctuary seekers and host communities.

Secondly, the report outlines the core principles that emerged through the participatory research. These are **enhanced community involvement**, **inclusivity scalability, sustainability and adaptability.** Drawing on these, the report then provides guidance for policy development across four areas:

- **Sanctuary Mechanism** – outlines the entitlements that would provide a sense of safety to sanctuary seekers who arrive through a safe pathway and how these can be mutually reinforcing with existing resettlement schemes and the asylum system.
- **Naming and Matching** – introduces the possibility for community groups to name the individuals they want to sponsor and argues for greater involvement of community groups in making arrangements pre-arrival.
- **Welcome and Inclusion** – highlights the greater capacity for UK communities to foster inclusion and lead to better outcomes for both sanctuary seekers and UK society, including through the diversification of sponsorship organisations and groups.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation** – emphasises the need for a robust approach to recording learning from implementing safe pathways to inform better policy in the future, as well as the need to clearly define and assign roles and responsibilities to relevant stakeholders.

This framework presents the tools to develop a better approach to the increasingly challenging issue of forced migration and a fairer, more inclusive way for the UK to be a world leading force in providing safe pathways. Communities up and down the country are ready to welcome and support those in need in partnership with local and national government.

Introduction: The case for Safe Routes

Drawing on academic research, this report presents a safe pathways policy framework that harnesses the potential of the existing UK community sponsorship scheme to facilitate community-led safe pathways, inclusion and welcome for sanctuary seekers from anywhere in the world. Our research highlights the need to expand, diversify, and consolidate current safe pathways to the UK. The current deterrence approach seeks to create a hostile environment for sanctuary seekers, which is ineffective in preventing them coming to the UK, is poor value for money, and conflicts with good will towards those in need expressed within communities in the UK. Expanding access to safe pathways would prevent sanctuary seekers from resorting to increasingly dangerous routes to the UK and would fulfil the UK's commitment and international obligation to protecting those feeling war and persecution across the globe.

The UK has a long history of welcoming and offering protection to people affected by conflict, persecution, and discrimination. This humanitarian ethos is part of the fibre of British society, and our shared commitment to supporting those who are subject to forced displacement is demonstrated through the UK being signatory to a variety of international agreements, including the 1951 Refugee Convention. In recent years, the UK has welcomed sanctuary seekers through UNHCR resettlement and schemes such as Community Sponsorship and dedicated safe pathways for people fleeing from Ukraine, Afghanistan and Hong Kong. These schemes demonstrate the positive outcomes safe pathways can have both for people seeking sanctuary and the communities that welcome them; however, they are limited in scope and often have restrictive eligibility requirements based on nationality.

Whilst there is no universally accepted definition of 'safe pathways', it is generally understood to refer to schemes that facilitate travel to a safe third country via a regular route (e.g. by chartered or commercial boat, flight, train or bus) that is legally mandated by the government of the country offering protection. No comprehensive framework currently exists that enables sanctuary seekers to travel safely to the UK for this purpose. Whilst nationality-specific schemes have been crucial in supporting sanctuary seekers and have helped to shape and expand the space for community-led welcome in the UK, the existence of a multiplicity of time-limited schemes that focus on specific contexts has, to date, prevented the development of a sustainable and scalable safe pathways framework.

Existing safe pathways schemes coexist alongside the UK hostile environment migration policy. Formally announced by the UK government in 2012 as an approach that explicitly set out to make life in the UK as difficult as possible for those who do not have formal legal status, hostile environment policies precede this date and continue to the present date. For instance, the previous Conservative Governments' Illegal Migration Act 2023 criminalises people arriving to the UK via 'irregular means' and the recently scrapped Rwanda plan, threatened to deport people who arrive in small boats to the UK. The Immigration bill being discussed in

parliament at the time of writing repeals parts of this act, as well as the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024. However, it still focuses on deterrence approaches, emphasising strategies to strengthen borders and remove legal protections to make it easier to deport people. Expanding safe pathways and creating more comprehensive and inclusive welcome policies would mean those seeking sanctuary would not need to resort to irregular routes to reach safety in the UK.

Both academic and civil society research have amply shown that deterrence measures are inhumane, fall short of international legal commitments, and are ineffective on their own terms. Such measures do not stop people from moving but rather change the routes people take, as elaborated below. Moreover, deterrence measures are extremely costly. The failed Rwanda scheme cost £700 million to deport just four people to Rwanda and was projected to cost a further £10 billion in the six years of the scheme. The Illegal Migration Act's punitive approach that sought to prevent people arriving by boat to seek asylum not only failed to deter people from taking these routes but was also unworkable. In addition, the act did not address the backlog in asylum decisions, with costs associated with the provision of accommodation amounting to billions of pounds.

Most people who are forcibly displaced move either within their country of origin or to neighbouring countries. Those that do seek sanctuary in the UK often have specific reasons for doing so that are unrelated to the UK's asylum policies or welfare system, which means that deterrence approaches might not deter them. As a (formally unreleased) Home Office reports notes:

> *"[Asylum seekers] are guided more by agents, the presence or absence of family and friends, language, and perceived cultural affinities than by scrutiny of asylum policies or rational evaluation of the welfare benefits on offer."* (Townsend, 2021).

These linguistic, cultural and family links are partially a result of UK's colonial history.

The 2024 change in government represents an opportunity to positively reshape UK immigration towards more inclusive, practical and workable approaches. It has been well-documented that the inaccessibility of safe routes pushes people seeking sanctuary to take more costly, lengthy and dangerous routes, both in the context of the UK and in European context more broadly (Ansems de Vries & Guild, 2019). Attempts to disrupt one particular route leads to a displacement effect, whereby smugglers and sanctuary seekers will find alternative routes that are often more dangerous – e.g. the shift from people hiding in lorries to taking dinghies across the Channel. The expansion of safe routes would enable people to seek sanctuary without relying on dangerous journeys and exploitative people smugglers. It would also enable the UK to manage arrivals effectively and logically, in ways that benefit UK communities and that avoid the waste of public funds that is characteristic of deterrence approaches.

This policy framework presents an approach to fulfilling international legal obligations, as well as obligations towards communities in the UK, to ensure people forced to flee can reach the UK with safety and dignity and contribute meaningfully to life in the UK. Firstly, this report will present existing evidence for the benefits a safe pathways policy framework and the

reasons deterrence approaches do not work. Secondly, it outlines the potential and limitations of existing community-led approaches in the UK. Finally, the proposed policy framework will be presented, with the view that this guidance could be used by policy-makers in the UK government, together with civil society organisations and communities of people with lived experience of forced migration, to develop a comprehensive, robust, and fit-for-purpose safe pathways policy that works for all communities in the UK.

Glossary

In the broad field of forced migration, including in academia, policy, and civil society, terms are used in different ways, often due to their sensitive and/or political nature. Below is a glossary of the terms used throughout the policy framework and the definitions we use in this document:

- **Sanctuary seeker** – this is a person who travels to the UK to seek protection on humanitarian grounds. In this document we use this as an overarching term that includes refugees, asylum seekers, and people with limited or discretionary leave to remain for reasons of seeking protection. We use this term to avoid the politicisation of categories such as migrant and refugee.
- **Asylum seeker** – a person who has made a claim for asylum within a host country. They may have arrived by an irregular journey, have a lapsed visa, or may be already resident in the UK and have a change in circumstance that means they can't safely return to their country of nationality.
- **Refugee** – a person who has been granted protection in a host country according to the definition provided by the 1951 Refugee Convention.
- **Protection –** this refers to a specific mode of protection provided within the UNHCR's framework of resettlement and designation of refugee status. Although all sanctuary seekers could be considered to seek protection in a general sense in the UK, the term is avoided so that it is not conflated with the UNHCR's use and the assessment of refugee status.
- **Vulnerability** – this is a set of criteria that UNHCR use to determine those that are most in need of protection. Those assessed as having high vulnerability and complex protection needs could be referred for resettlement, which would give them indefinite leave to remain in the UK.
- **Resettlement** – This is a safe pathway that provides a route towards permanent settlement those with high vulnerability and complex protection needs. This might be a more appropriate route for these people as it is unlikely that they will ever be able to safely return to the country or context that they fled.
- **Sponsor** – this refers to a group or an individual within that group that supports a sanctuary seeking or refugee family to travel safely to the UK and provides a welcome and integration function. Under the UK Community Sponsorship scheme, the group provides accommodation for the family to live in for a minimum of 2 years.
- **Host** – A host performs a similar welcome and support function to a sponsor, but the sanctuary seeker they support will usually live in a room within their own home rather than in separate accommodation.
- **Guest** – a sanctuary seeker that lives in the home of a host.
- **Lead Sponsor** – a charity or Community Interest Company (CIC) under the auspices of which smaller sponsorship groups can operate. The lead sponsor is legally responsible for delivery of the Sponsor Agreement, signs and submits the applications to the Home Office, and acts as a guarantor for the sponsor group. More information can be found here: https://resetuk.org/toolkits/for-lead-sponsors

- **Principal (Lead) Sponsor** – this is a lead sponsor organisation that has been recognised by the UK Home Office for having a track record for resettling refugees. They can apply to resettle more refugee families through a more streamlined process.
- **CSLA** - A Community Sponsorship Licensing Agreement is a proposal from the Community Sponsorship Alliance for experienced sponsoring organisations to have a license to resettle multiple families without having to make individual applications for each. The aim of this is to speed up the process for resettlement.
- **Humanitarian visa** – a visa that allows a sanctuary seeker to enter a country in order to seek protection and/or includes a form of protection.
- **Complementary pathway** – arrival in the UK on a standard visa route, e.g. work, family, or study visa. The individual who is issued this visa may have the intention to seek sanctuary, but no explicit humanitarian grounds are considered during the application for these visas.
- **ACRS** – the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme was a resettlement route that gave indefinite leave to remain for Afghan citizens who assisted the UK or were from a vulnerable group. This pathway did not allow applications, rather people were nominated through one of 3 pathways.
- **ARAP** – The Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy was similar to the ACRS but was for Afghan citizens who worked with or for the UK government in Afghanistan in roles that may now put them at risk. Nominations to be resettled for these workers and their dependents were made by the Ministry of Defence and were reviewed for suitability by the Home Office.

Expanding Access to Safe Routes: Existing Evidence

Deterrence approaches are ineffective in preventing people seeking sanctuary in the UK. Escaping danger plays a bigger role in sanctuary seeker's decision to leave than policies in the country of arrival. The main effect of deterrence is to push sanctuary seekers into more dangerous routes, which plays into the hands of criminal gangs rather than break their business model. Current policies are also expensive and lead to negative effects within UK communities. Safe pathways have the potential to reduce the numbers of people who take 'irregular' and dangerous journeys. Building on resources within civil society through community sponsorship is more cost effective and gives UK communities more agency in facilitating safe pathways, which leads to better outcomes for both communities and sanctuary seekers.

In recent years there has been a growing focus on net migration figures in the UK, and reducing the number of people attempting to cross the Channel in small boats has been a key policy aim of successive governments. The approach taken by the previous Conservative government focused predominantly on deterrence to travelling to the UK. The new Labour government has so far focused on enforcement, investing in a new border force to tackle smuggling gangs. However, these approaches have had a limited effect on their stated aim of reducing the number of people who take dangerous journeys to enter the UK. They also only provide a short-term measure that emphasises strengthening national borders, and policies of this nature do not provide an answer to the issue of the inaccessibility of safe pathways to the UK in general. A more sustainable approach is needed to future-proof the UK's response to forced migration (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019; IOM, 2017).

Measuring policy impact is notoriously difficult, particularly for international phenomena such as migration, because of the complex interplay of contributory factors. However, as mentioned above, the influence of policy changes in the countries people attempt to move to is thought to be relatively small compared to political and socio-economic conditions in conflict countries (Cooper, 2019). Policies may also have delayed effects, making it difficult to track their impact, and often have unintended side-effects (Düvell, 2011). In addition, the level of awareness that people seeking sanctuary have about the policies of the countries they travel to and through has been questioned (Squire et al., 2021). Misleading information can be shared among clandestine networks, and it can be difficult to know which information to trust, even from official sources.

Despite the complex nature of evidencing in this case, there is a body of evidence from across the globe that together offers a picture for the potential of safe pathways to reduce the need for dangerous journeys. The next section presents a summary of key evidence showing that deterrence is not a solution, and examples of cases in other national contexts that demonstrate the benefits of expanding access to safe pathways.

Deterrence is ineffective:

Deterrence is unlikely to dissuade people who are escaping dangerous situations from seeking sanctuary in the UK. Deterrence policies do not affect the reasons for migration, but rather just change decisions made about the routes that they take (de Haas, 2011). Qualitative research conducted with forced migrants by Hagen-Zanker and Mallet also found that those who have made the journey through Europe have already taken substantial risks, so additional risk is unlikely to have any additional deterrence effects (2016). As the Home Office's (2023a, p. 13) own analysis states, the "academic consensus is that there is little to no evidence suggesting changes in a destination country's policies have an impact on deterring people from leaving their countries of origin or travelling without valid permission".

Deterrence approaches redirect sanctuary seekers into more dangerous routes to avoid detection. Borelli (2021) found that an increased surveillance around entry to the Channel Tunnel at Calais led to an increase in the number of boat crossings as those wishing to cross avoided stowing on lorries and trains. The Refugee Council have also noted that landings in the UK have moved to more diverse locations to avoid increased surveillance around Dover, leading to sanctuary seekers facing more risky journeys. The Home Office (2023b, Section 21a), in their impact assessment of the Nationality and Borders Bill, acknowledges that deterrence measures risk encouraging people to "attempt riskier means of entering the UK". Deterrence approaches also disproportionately affect women and girls. It has been found that carrier sanctions and privatisation of border security[1] exposes women and girls to higher risk of experiencing gender-based violence (Fernandez Buman, 2019).

Deterrence does not 'break the business model' of people smugglers. A lack of accessible safe routes can be easily exploited by people smugglers since it creates a demand for irregular routes (Crawley, 2024; Safe Passage International, 2023). In 2023, only 8% of people identified by UNHCR as in need of resettlement were resettled in a third country (UNHCR, 2024a). Considering those who do not fall within UNHCR's vulnerability criteria, this accounts for less than 1% or refugees globally (*ibid.*). This creates a huge market for smugglers and traffickers to exploit. Where safe pathways exist and are well managed people use them. This is demonstrated by the very low proportion of Ukrainians who arrive by small boats compared to more restrictive schemes, like Afghanistan, or countries with no schemes, like Iran and Iraq; citizens of which are the highest number to arrive by small boat (Statista, 2024).

Restrictive and overly bureaucratic procedures push people into irregular routes. Individuals who might be eligible for safe pathways might be forced into irregular routes to avoid threats that they face while awaiting decisions in complex or convoluted

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[1] Privatisation of border security refers to the delegation of border security to non-state actors, such as contracting private security firms to run immigration detention centres and assist with deportations. It also includes the requirement for transport companies, such as airlines, international trains and ferries, to check immigration documentation at point of departure. Allowing someone to board a carrier with incorrect documentation can result in a large fine, referred to as a carrier sanction.

application procedures for safe pathways (Bychawski, 2023). A slow and restrictive family reunion process means that children often decide to take dangerous, irregular routes rather than persist with the 'broken' legal route (Safe Passage International, 2023, p. 11). Of the 12,248 unaccompanied children who travelled to the UK between 2010-2020, only 700 arrived through a legal route (Safe Passage, 2021).

Family reunification routes are also severely limited by the availability of biometrics centres in origin countries (RAMFEL, 2024). This is further exacerbated by the eligibility of family members within the family reunification process, limited only to spouses, civil partners, or unmarried partner (with proof of 2 year's cohabitation), or a child under 18. Aunts, uncles, cousins and adult children, who may be reliant on non-nuclear family for support, are not eligible for the UK family reunification route and so must find another option. The inability of children to act as sponsors for their own parents also significantly contributes to the pressure to take irregular routes in the absence of legally recognised pathways to restore family units as an essential support structure.

Higher refusal rates in the asylum system is not an effective deterrence. It may be assumed that having a stricter asylum system would discourage people from coming to the UK. However, Czaika and Holbolth (2016) found that across European Union countries (pre-Brexit), a 10% increase in asylum rejections correlated with an increase in the number of irregular entries by 2-4%. The lack of a deterrence effect in this case provides further evidence for the limited impact that UK immigration policies have on decisions made by sanctuary seekers to travel to the UK compared to the situation they face in the conflict or difficulties they face in the places they leave.

Restrictive policies also have a negative impact on UK communities. Since the introduction of the Illegal Migration Bill (2023), the Refugee Council have found that many people they support have disengaged from services and slipped into the shadows of society due to fear of being removed. This puts them at serious risk of exploitation. There have also been instances of young people going missing as they approach their 18th birthday for fear of being removed once they are legally considered an adult. This puts them at an even greater risk of exploitation due to their young age (British Refugee Council, 2023). Anti-immigrant rhetoric is also causing division within our communities and a threat to refugees and asylum seekers already in the UK (Crawley, 2024), demonstrated in the spate of riots from far-right groups that happened in August 2024. A more compassionate policy is required that frames sanctuary seekers as humans and not an abstract threat.

A negative and sensationalised rhetoric about small boats distorts and politicises the issue; it does not address the human impact of forced migration. The previous Conservative government made a pledge to "Stop the Boats", which distorted the public's view of how people came to be in the position to claim asylum. Between 2018-2023, those arriving by small boat crossing only accounted for 29% of all asylum applications (the most recent figure, for 2023, is 31%) (Sturge, 2024). Over-staying visas or becoming irregular due to a change in immigration status of people already in the UK because of changing

situations in conflict zones are more common pathways to irregularity than crossing borders (Cooper, 2019).

Deterrence approaches do not provide value for money. Home Office figures show that asylum hotel accommodation measures were expected to cost £3.1 billion in the financial year to March 2024 (National Audit Office, 2024). Accommodation on sites such as ex-military bases and the Bibby Stockholm is also projected to cost more (*ibid.*). This figure includes those who entered the UK 'irregularly', as well as those who arrived through ARAP and ACRS resettlement schemes, but who have not been able to find longer term accommodation. In addition, the Conservative Government's Rwanda scheme was estimated to have cost £700 million before it was scrapped, and the new Labour Government claim that scrapping the scheme will save £220 million in payments to Rwanda and £750 million that had been put in reserve for the future running of the scheme (Morton, 2024). However, it should be noted that most of the money that was earmarked for the Rwanda scheme has now been put into the creation of a new border security force rather than development of more safe pathways.

The Potential of Safe Pathways:

Safe Pathways provide better value for money. A June 2023 Impact Assessment of the Illegal Migration Bill conducted by the Home Office (2023a) estimated that the cost of relocating sanctuary seekers to a safe third country to have their claims processed was £169,000 per person, compared to £12,000 for processing their claims in the UK. Of the relocation cost, a majority of this (£105,000 per person) was to be paid directly to the recipient third country. In contrast, a majority of the cost for the Homes for Ukraine scheme was in payments to Local Authorities, and amounted to £10,500 per person (reduced to £5,900 for arrivals from 31 December 2024) (Committee of Public Accounts, 2024). Although this does not cover the full costs of either deterrence or running of the safe pathway, the stark difference in per-person costs for each approach shows the potential financial saving that Safe Pathways could have to the UK.

There could also be additional savings for safe pathways that lead into robust welcome and integration schemes. A report by the Woolf Institute's Commission on the Integration of Refugees has found that an "integration-based asylum system" could have far-reaching economic benefits in the UK (2024, p. 8). Drawing on a financial model developed by the London School of Economics, they have found that, under such an asylum scheme, the benefits would outweigh the costs within three years, with a net economic benefit of at least £1.2 billion within five years. This is in stark contrast to the vast cost of temporary accommodation, such as military barracks and the Bibby Stockholm[2], and externalisation of border control that are designed to prevent sanctuary seekers from being able to access and participate meaningfully in British society.

Expanding access to safe pathways has been shown to reduce the number of irregular entries in a range of other national contexts:

- In the US, the Humanitarian Parole programme known as the Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (CHNV), provided a means for citizens of these countries to travel safely to the US and stay for a period of 2 years under a private sponsorship arrangement. This led to an 89% drop in the seven-day average of those trying to cross the border without correct documentation at the Southwest border of the US in the first six months of it operating (Department of Homeland Security (USA), 2023).
- The Western Balkan Regulation in Germany offered people from the Western Balkan region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo) a regular pathway that enabled them to find employment in Germany. The introduction of this policy in 2015 led to a substantive decrease in first time asylum applications. This was in conjunction with more enforcement across the Western Balkan route (Bither & Ziebarth, 2018).

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[2] Bibby Stockholm – A barge that was docked at Portland Port in Dorset that was contracted by the Home Office to house male asylum seekers while their claims were being processed. The barge attracted much controversy due to concerns about living conditions and the impact on the local community. At the time of publication, the housed men have been moved on to other accommodation and the barge has since departed Dorset.

- Using data from migration from Jamaica as a country of origin, Simon et al. (2018) found that increasing restrictions to family-based visas led to the largest re-orientation to irregular routes. Restrictions to student and high-skilled visas, on the other hand, showed limited reorientation since these individuals were likely to be able to access other formal routes. This is significant because it has been claimed that family reunification is one of the primary reasons for seeking sanctuary in the UK (Safe Passage International, 2023).
- Along the US-Mexico border, irregular migration was shown to rapidly decrease upon the introduction of seasonal work visas, when implemented alongside complementary migration and labour-based policies (Clemens & Gough, 2019; de Haas et al., 2019). An increase in border enforcement alone may reduce the number of people who made unauthorised crossings at the US-Mexico border, but actually led to an increase in net migration because it also reduced the number of people without official immigration documentation that returned to Mexico (de Haas et al., 2019).

Resettlement and community-led sponsorship schemes work and have wide public support. The Homes for Ukraine Scheme, and its predecessors (including Community Sponsorship, the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, and the UK Resettlement Scheme) show how a safe pathway can be implemented successfully. The willingness of the UK public to act as sponsors or hosts as part of these schemes demonstrates their support for people seeking sanctuary. Moreover, there is a longer history of the UK government providing a safe pathway for sanctuary seekers with public support. For instance, the relocation of 1200 migrants from the Sangatte Refugee Camp in Northern France on work visas in 2002 (Jordan & Brown, 2006; Pearce, 2015), and the Voucher scheme for Asian Ugandans in the 1970s.

Communities for Afghans – shifting to community-led welcome. The Afghan resettlement schemes (ACRS and ARAP) were ambitious safe pathways schemes. Through these schemes, Indefinite Leave to Remain being granted to 12,918 individuals as of November 2024 (Home Office, 2024). However, they have been criticised for being poorly implemented and only providing ad-hoc support for those who arrived in the UK (Bejan et al., 2023). Many people did not meet the eligibility criteria, resulting in Afghans being one of the top nationalities to attempt irregular entry to the UK (Walsh & Cuibus, 2024), and many of those who arrived were housed in inappropriate hotel accommodation for long periods of time. The establishment of the Communities for Afghans scheme demonstrates a belief in the capability of UK communities to play an active and meaningful role in welcoming those in search of sanctuary.

Where Safe Pathways are provided and are accessible, people use them. In contrast to the Afghan schemes, the Homes for Ukraine schemes demonstrated the potential to provide safe pathways rapidly and at scale. The sponsorship mechanism made this programme much more accessible than the nomination mechanism in the Afghan schemes. Consequently, Ukrainians opted to take safe routes to reach the UK. In fact, only

one Ukrainian was reported to have attempted a journey to the UK via a small boat (Bettum, 2023). The novel approach taken by the Ukraine schemes, giving an initial period of leave to remain of 3 years rather than indefinite leave provided by a formal resettlement route, allowed for a rapid scaling up of the pathway and gave some flexibility in support provided to meet evolving needs as the situation unfolded.

Better regional cooperation would lay the foundation for effective safe pathways. Cooperation with the EU is essential to effectively address the lack of safe pathways across Europe. With Brexit, the UK also left the Dublin III regulation. This regulation included the stipulation that sanctuary seekers could not make asylum claims in multiple EU countries and provided a return mechanism between states. However, more significantly it included a route for refugee family reunification between European states, especially for unaccompanied minors. Since then, no replacement regulation has been agreed. Since family reunification is reported to be a major reason for seeking sanctuary in the UK it is essential that the UK cooperates with neighbours to create safe routes for families to stay together without the need to take dangerous journeys.

Existing Community-led Pathways to the UK: Benefits and Limitations

Current community sponsorship schemes in the UK benefit from drawing on the capacity of people in the UK to improve inclusion of sanctuary seekers. The Homes for Ukraine scheme in particular shows the potential of this approach to be scalable and adaptable to respond to emerging humanitarian situations. However, to expand the scheme further, community sponsorship must remove administrative barriers that make it difficult for sponsorship groups to get started; provide sustainable funding within a more concrete framework to overcome ad hoc programming that relies mostly on volunteers; expand eligibility beyond UNHCR vulnerability criteria; and implement a robust monitoring and evaluation framework.

In this framework we focus on community-led sponsorship and its potential for a significant scaling up and development of safe pathways. Current community schemes include the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) Community Sponsorship, Homes for Ukraine, and Communities for Afghans[3]. UKRS Community Sponsorship is a resettlement scheme that was introduced in the UK in 2016, and it enables voluntary and local community organisations and faith groups to welcome and support people seeking sanctuary in the UK. Local groups apply to the Home Office to become sponsors for a refugee family and are responsible for securing accommodation for the first two years, raising money and supporting their sponsored family in learning English, accessing school, work, healthcare and welfare, as well as helping them settle into the community. Community sponsorship models are proven to have hugely positive results for the inclusion and integration of sanctuary seekers (Ansems de Vries et al., 2018; RESET, 2022). Studies involving similar schemes in Canada have shown that sanctuary seekers who arrive through community sponsorship models have better language-learning outcomes, more community involvement, achieve financial independence more quickly, and have better wellbeing outcomes (see for example Kaida et al., 2020). Community led sponsorship models also empower communities in the process of welcoming people seeking sanctuary, drawing on and further fostering grass roots community support.

However, the current community sponsorship model in the UK has several limitations that obstruct the possibilities for scaling and unlocking its full potential. Like other resettlement schemes such as the UKRS, Community Sponsorship is only open to people formally recognised as refugees by UNHCR, and who fulfil UNHCR's vulnerability-based resettlement criteria. The overly bureaucratic application process and complicated vulnerability-based eligibility criteria are disincentivising for sponsoring groups and there have also been

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[3] Communities for Afghans supports those who arrived in the UK through the ACRS and ARAP programmes. ACRS had three pathways, only one of which, Pathway 2, was a formal resettlement scheme led in partnership with UNHCR. Pathways 1 and 3 have different referral mechanisms but still lead to permanent leave to remain in the UK.

difficulties receiving the mandated approval from local authorities. The reliance on volunteers and their requirement to raise £9000[4] can present another obstacle. Unlike in similar schemes elsewhere, sponsoring groups are unable to nominate or 'name' the people they wish to sponsor, which means a valuable source of sponsor motivation remains untapped. Research conducted by Share Network with the International Catholic Migration Commission argue that named sponsorship "leverage[es] shared affiliations (e.g., professional, cultural, sexual orientation) [that] fosters stronger community engagement," and that this can be a powerful complement to vulnerability-based resettlement (Share Network, 2024, p. 9). In the first seven years of the UK's Community Sponsorship scheme only 1000 people had been resettled through the community sponsorship, despite additional barriers to resettlement that were presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. While this has been life changing for many families and communities, these limitations need to be addressed to make sponsorship accessible to people on a larger scale.

Homes for Ukraine, introduced in 2022, demonstrated that it was possible to draw on the support of communities to rapidly establish a scalable sponsorship scheme that enabled people to travel to the UK on what was effectively a humanitarian visa. Over 179,500 people arrived in the UK through Ukrainian visa schemes, with around 70% of these through the Ukraine sponsorship scheme and 30% through the Ukraine Family Scheme. This success was possible due to much less stringent criteria on so-called *hosts* (as opposed to *sponsors* in traditional community sponsorship) requiring them only to provide suitable accommodation, including in their own home. Fundraising was not required, and sponsors received government thank you payments. However, the scheme also resulted in safeguarding concerns and issues around the duration and stability of housing arrangements (British Refugee Council, 2024). Analysis from the Office for National Statistics (2023) showed that 60% of hosts would host people seeking sanctuary in the future (including hosting sanctuary seekers from other countries), demonstrating ongoing sponsor motivation. However, barriers to hosting were also identified, such as lack of support and unclear expectations around hosting. The Communities for Afghans pilot scheme, introduced in 2024 sought to draw on the best practice from existing sponsorship models, and addresses some of their limitations. Both the Ukraine and Afghan schemes are limited by exclusions based on nationality.

Overall, community led welcome initiatives demonstrate the strengths of community involvement and the potential for scalable and agile responses to welcoming sanctuary seekers. They are limited by financial and bureaucratic burdens on volunteers; insufficient funding and governmental support; restrictive eligibility requirements including exclusions based on nationality; reliance of some schemes on UNHCR referrals; and limited suitable housing (summarised in Table 1). What is needed is a scheme that builds on existing community involvement but streamlines and integrates this into a sustainable framework and removes unnecessary bureaucratic burdens. This should be a universal scheme for sanctuary seekers from all nationalities, with widened eligibility criteria. We propose an expansion of community-based sponsorship that introduces the possibility for sponsors to name the people they welcome. Rather than ad hoc responses to changing global events, this scheme

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[4] The fundraising element has been dropped from the Communities for Afghans scheme.

would be ambitiously and sustainably funded, to enable organisations, sponsorship groups and local authorities to adequately plan for the future and develop and sustain resources, infrastructure and expertise over time.

Guiding Principles of a Safe Pathways Framework

Building on the strengths and limitations of existing community sponsorship programmes in the UK and abroad, we propose that a truly safe pathway must reflect the following guiding principles. These have been developed through collaboration and discussion with civil society partners, academics, policy makers, and people with lived experience of forced migration (see Appendix 1 for the research methods):

- **Inclusive**: Safe pathways must be open to people from based anywhere in the world who are in need of sanctuary, regardless of nationality. A cohesive, inclusive framework is both fairer for people seeking sanctuary and more practical for organisations providing support, leading to integrated infrastructure.
- **Community-led**: Safe pathways must draw on and develop existing community sponsorship and welcome initiatives. Community sponsorship is proven to promote better integration outcomes for sanctuary seekers and has the potential to strengthen and empower communities.
- **Scalable:** A safe pathways framework must be implemented across the UK, at a larger scale than current community sponsorship and welcome initiatives. This requires strengthening and expanding infrastructure within government and local authorities.
- **Adaptable:** The framework must enable quick responses to global events without relying on the development of new schemes each time. It must be open to various forms of sponsorship, including education and labour pathways.
- **Sustainable:** A safe pathways framework must strengthen and develop community capacity for a continued pathway to sanctuary into the future. This requires long term, ambitious funding to develop infrastructure and expertise. This will provide a foundation for building sustainable livelihoods including access to housing, work, education, and cultural resources.

Guiding Principles	Current schemes: Strengths	Current schemes: Limitations	What is needed
Community involvement	• Supports inclusion and integration • Empowers communities • Draws on and fosters existing community support	• Relies on volunteers • Financial limitations	• Build on existing community involvement • Streamline and integrate into a sustainable framework
Inclusivity	• CS scheme offers sanctuary to most vulnerable	• Exclusion based on nationality	• Universal scheme for sanctuary seekers, regardless of nationality, and expanded eligibility criteria
Scalability	• H4U shows that a scalable scheme is possible	• Community Sponsorship scheme difficult to scale due to bureaucratic burden and reliance on UNHCR referrals • Limitations for scaling due to lack of suitable housing	• Introduction of naming • Streamline/decentralise bureaucratic processes • Broader sustainable housing framework
Sustainability	• Existing and developing networks of stakeholders • Grassroots learning • Emerging Welcome networks	• Insufficient funding • Ad hoc approach • Policy-wide monitoring and evaluation not sufficiently comprehensive	• Building for the future rather than emergency response requires sustainable financing allowing groups, local authorities and organisations to sustain resources, infrastructure and expertise.
Adaptability	• H4U shows potential for agile response	• Ad hoc approach with multiple schemes	• Shift from emergency response to developing sustainable, flexible framework

Table 1 – Strengths and Limitations of Current Community-Based Schemes

Proposed Policy Framework

The proposed framework provides guidance for developing a more effective and fit-for-purpose safe pathways policy that incorporates community sponsorship as a key element. This sits within a broader sanctuary landscape that includes UNHCR resettlement and complementary pathways, all of which sit alongside the asylum system. Each of the policy options presented in the framework are framed as complementary to UNHCR resettlement quotas, so don't replace them, and do not impinge on a fair and functioning asylum system. The policy framework begins with a consideration of initial eligibility criteria and introduces the options for sponsor groups to name potential sanctuary seekers they wish to support. It then extends beyond arrival in the UK to also incorporate dimensions of welcome and inclusion, supporting long-term sustainability with a robust approach to monitoring and evaluation.

Overview of the Framework

The framework outlined here proposes a structure within which to build upon the existing success of community sponsorship in the UK in line with the guiding principles stated in the previous section. This framework presents various options to policymakers, for instance to develop a new community sponsorship scheme, and/or consolidate existing schemes into a single community sponsorship programme with different strands. This would then sit within the broader UK sanctuary landscape alongside UNHCR resettlement and complementary pathways. It is essential that each of these approaches is considered in light of the other so mutually reinforcing elements can be utilised and any sanctuary seeker that enters the UK has access to the same benefits and entitlements, regardless of which scheme or route they arrive through. Here, we will outline how each section of the model in Figure 1, below, can complement the proposed framework.
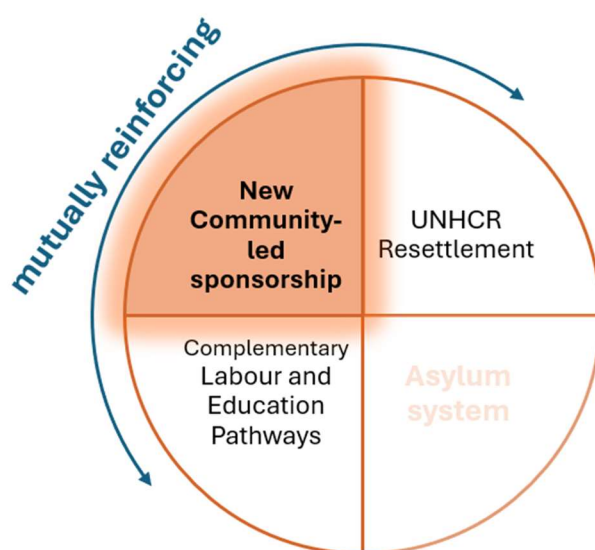

Figure 1 – The Overall Asylum, Sanctuary and Protection Landscape for the UK

A fair and functioning asylum system

A fair and functioning asylum system that can operate independently of any other scheme or pathway is crucial. Sanctuary seekers need a means through which to claim asylum within the UK for a variety of reasons. For example, those who have been trafficked to the UK, or find themselves in a situation where they have a lapsed visa but cannot return to their country of origin. However, a more comprehensive, adaptable and well-resourced overall policy framework would reduce the number of people who are forced to take dangerous routes to the UK for the purpose of claiming asylum.

UNHCR resettlement

The policy options presented in this framework complement UNHCR resettlement schemes but there is a degree of overlap between each of these elements of the broader framework. The UNHCR scheme is a pathway to resettlement and eligibility criteria are based on protection need. This ensures that sanctuary can be extended to the most in need and hard to reach people across the world. A new approach incorporating community sponsorship would provide an additional pathway to sanctuary in which vulnerability assessed by UNHCR is not the main criterion. Options could include temporary protection offered in a similar manner to non-resettlement pathways, such as the Homes for Ukraine scheme. However, anyone who arrives through a community sponsorship route should have a pathway to permanent leave to remain, if necessary, in the future to provide them with a sense of security in the sanctuary that is offered. When offered in addition to the quotas agreed for UNHCR-led resettlement, this approach expands access to safe pathways to a greater number of people. Opening community-led sponsorship to those who come through visa routes that do not include a protection element, such as student and work visas, also provides support for sanctuary seekers who are outside of asylum and resettlement pathways.

Refugee family reunification

Refugee family reunification is one of the major reasons for sanctuary seekers to travel to the UK specifically (British Red Cross, 2024). The existing refugee family reunification process is limited to immediate family members (spouses and children) and is a long and complicated administrative process (RAMFEL, 2024; UNHCR, 2024b). A key policy option made in the framework is to introduce the ability for members of British society to nominate sanctuary seekers they would like to sponsor through a naming mechanism. Refugee families that are established in the UK would be able to use naming to support other family members who do not qualify, help them reach safety more quickly, and encourage better inclusion into society.

Complementary education and labour pathways

Complementary education and labour pathways refer to two kinds of pathways to seek sanctuary in the UK. Firstly, through specific programmes set up to allow entry to the UK via specific visa arrangements related to work of study (such as the Refugee Work Visa pilot or a CARA Fellowship). Secondly, through standard work or study visa routes that do not include any specific protection element. This second case is generally only available to sanctuary seekers with access to better social/cultural capital and resources. Despite potentially being in a less vulnerable position than other sanctuary seekers, those who enter the UK through such a pathway are at significant risk of return if they are not able to renew their work or study visa. The framework supports building on existing novel approaches to further diversify types of sponsorship organisations King's College London, for example, conducted a pilot to register as a community sponsor group, which supported resettlement of a family and gave access to higher education for one of the family members. Different models could be explored, such as university and sponsorship groups partnering, so beneficiaries receive the support

and benefits associated with community sponsorship while also continuing their education. Such an approach could also be used in a targeted fashion to address skills shortages in the UK through labour pathways, whilst also providing sanctuary to someone who needs it.

Key Areas of Focus

The recommendations outlined here came about through research conducted with communities of lived experience of forced migration, community groups and charities that support sanctuary seekers in the UK, policy makers from the Home Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, UNHCR, and academics in the field of forced migration. The framework focuses on four key areas that were identified through a co-productive approach to knowledge sharing: 1) eligibility and sanctuary mechanisms 2) naming and matching 3) welcome and inclusion and 4) monitoring and evaluation. These four areas form the broad community-led framework that allows people to travel safely to find sanctuary in the UK from anywhere in the world.

1) Eligibility and Sanctuary Mechanism

Eligibility for Sanctuary Seekers

Our research identified that limiting eligibility criteria to UNHCR-assessed vulnerability criteria is a major barrier to achieving inclusivity and scalability. The UNHCR schemes ensure that the most vulnerable people with the highest protection needs can access appropriate resettlement routes but this only accounts for a small proportion of those in need of a durable solution. A new or consolidated scheme that is developed following the guidance suggested here, however, could provide access to a safe route for those that do not fall withing the UNHCR vulnerability criteria. Resettlement and a complementary safe pathway can work together as part of a consolidated policy to ensure appropriate pathways are available for sanctuary seekers based anywhere outside of the UK.

Eligibility for a new or consolidated scheme can use the UN Refugee Convention definition of a refugee as a basis, considering an eligible person to be:

> "*someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.*" (UNHCR, n.d. paraphrased from 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees)

This would align the scheme to the UK's existing global humanitarian commitment. However, to be more inclusive it could also recognise that many people who have a credible fear of persecution might be internally displaced or may be stateless (such as the Rohingya people), so eligibility criteria is then not necessarily restricted to those who are outside of their own country. A focus on the fear that someone has for their safety or freedom, not their specific location outside of the UK or degree of vulnerability they face in their current situation, is therefore the foundation upon which eligibility is built. Taking this as a starting point, precise dimensions of eligibility can be formulated through further collaborative work with relevant stakeholders, such as refugee communities, civil society leaders, and experts in refugee law.

Administrative processes

One of the major barriers to accessing a safe pathway is being able to get permission to leave a dangerous location pursue onward travel to the UK. The UK may not maintain consular services in conflict zones or have partnerships with visa processing organisations that might operate in these contexts. Trying to fulfil administrative criteria such as biometric approval may therefore be impossible or could give rise to long delays, which extends the time sanctuary seekers need to remain in potentially life-threatening situations. There may also be some difficulties for those with claims on political grounds, as government agencies may confiscate passports or enforce arbitrary detention on its opponents so that they cannot leave.

To overcome some of these challenges and expedite administrative processes to allow people to leave dangerous situations, the UK Government can identify trusted partner organisations that can approve identities and credibility for sanctuary seekers who wish to apply to the scheme. These organisations could apply for a license to approve identities and make nominations for those who fulfil eligibility criteria, in a similar way to UNHCR referral for resettlement schemes. This would allow rapid decisions to be made to allow sanctuary seekers to travel to the UK. Organisations could be selected based on their knowledge of the context and work they do on the ground with persecuted populations. An example of this in practice is the organisation Rainbow Railroad, who work to provide pathways for LGBTQIA+ sanctuary seekers in places where they face discrimination and persecution to safety in North America.

In addition, processes can be put in place to approve identities of those who do not have official identity documents. This could include recognising out-of-date passports, collated unofficial forms of identity, and being vouched for by partnering community leaders. In the absence of a valid travel document, for example if a passport has been confiscated, the UK government can issue temporary travel documents to reach the UK, such as the Certificate to Travel that is available in existing resettlement pathways. Biometric checks can also be completed upon arrival in the UK to prevent delays in traveling to safety in the UK, as was implemented in the Ukraine schemes.

Leave to Remain and Entitlements

Participants in this research asserted the need to provide temporary leave to remain to sanctuary seekers initially with an accessible pathway to indefinite leave to remain in line with the existing community sponsorship scheme. After this period, they will be eligible to apply for indefinite leave to remain. Setting the initial entitlement as five years prevents the need for making multiple applications to extend right to remain and sets a better foundation for sanctuary seekers to make short-to-medium term planning for things like employment and accommodation. Five years gives a level of security and certainty which helps to improve integration outcomes and alleviates feelings of anxiety about the future. It allows provides a pathway for those who establish sustainable livelihoods in the UK to remain longer, particularly in the case of protracted crises which would not allow return.

Through the framework sanctuary seekers can work and study in the UK from the day of arrival. For study, the those being sponsored are best categorised as home students, so that they have access to tuition fee and maintenance loans for studying at university, as is the case in the Ukrainian schemes. Access to work and study is essential for facilitating integration efforts and gives a pathway to self-reliance. The deficit view that sanctuary seekers want to come to the UK to be lazy and claim welfare benefits is a myth that is not upheld by evidence (Crawley, 2010). Our research showed that sanctuary seekers want to be part of society and have enriched communities across the UK. Allowing access to education and employment helps them to rebuild their lives and have some hope for the future, and has been shown to have a positive macroeconomic impact on host countries through the tax revenue it generates (d'Albis et al., 2018; Todd et al., 2019).

Although emphasis is placed on helping sanctuary seekers to develop self-sufficiency, they must have access to social benefits in line with the existing community sponsorship scheme from day of arrival, such as universal credit. This provides a safety net to prevent people from falling into poverty or becoming homeless, particularly at vulnerable times like when they are transitioning out of a sponsorship arrangement. Research participants expressed that there was a delay in receiving first payments after registering for universal credit, leaving new arrivals without government-provided financial support for several weeks. Efforts are needed to expedite this process by completing some administrative steps before arrival. During the sponsorship period, the amount of this entitlement can take into account the money provided to them from the community sponsor group as a form of income, but this does not preclude them from seeking housing benefit, for example, in cases where rent or the cost-of-living increases over time. Any specific arrangements in this respect need to be simple and well-communicated to ease navigation of the welfare system.

Introducing an Emergency Mechanism

Sudden or unprecedented global events may give rise to acute protection needs in a specific context in ways that do not align with the precise eligibility criteria set for a safe pathways scheme or framework. An example of this was seen following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, a country that had not previously been thought of as a refugee sending country. It was idiosyncratic because the government of this country was friendly towards the UK, whereas in more typical refugee situations the government of the sending country is often hostile or ambivalent towards the UK. Many aspects of the Ukrainian schemes were established in partnership with the Ukrainian government and were designed with post-conflict reconstruction in mind. The schemes were therefore characteristically different to previous safe pathways. Discussions from our research therefore highlighted the need to have flexibility in the sanctuary mechanism to respond to such emergency situations.

An emergency mechanism would therefore apply to the outbreak of war or a change in law that would endanger a particular demographic of people in a country or region. This could then be activated to temporarily change the eligibility criteria and sanctuary mechanism within the scheme. In these cases, eligibility could be extended to encompass wider ranging criteria, e.g. nationality of a country, or belonging to a particular demographic group. This

would allow specific protection arrangements to be agreed to better support affected citizens. For example, entitlements such as length of leave to remain could be changed to better meet the demands of a particular incident or context.

Work to be done:
- Set eligibility criteria that could be applied universally in any context where someone may have a legitimate fear for their safety or freedom.
- Align processes for judging eligibility with existing resettlement and humanitarian schemes so that they are mutually reinforcing and not competitive.
- Establish a framework to issue licenses to organisations for identity and eligibility approval, and a process through which to make nominations.
- Formalise processes for issuing temporary travel documents within the framework and how these can reach people in locations where the UK has no consular presence.
- Build on the criteria set in Homes for Ukraine for providing temporary approval for travel to the UK and consider how this could be implemented in other contexts.
- Use the Ukraine model as a starting point to develop guidance for how to develop an emergency mechanism that is consistent with core principals of the framework.

2) Naming and Matching

Naming:

A key insight that developed through our research is the importance of including sponsorship groups and organisations in the matching and/or naming process, either by enabling them to name the people that they wish to sponsor, or by being directly involved in the matching process. Feedback from community sponsorship organisations, as well as research from other sponsorship contexts such as Canada, has shown that naming improves integration and inclusion outcomes for sanctuary seekers by creating better matches between sponsors and the people they welcome. It also gives communities more autonomy in welcoming new arrivals. Naming has been a crucial part of the success of Canada's community sponsorship programme, driving its growth and effectiveness. It can broaden the scope for potential sponsors, by drawing on a wide variety of sponsor motivations and diverse community and interest groups including universities, schools, churches, mosques, workplaces and others, including LGBTQ+ groups for example.

Naming can also provide an avenue for expanding options for people to join family in the UK. While family reunion processes need urgent reform, expanded sponsorship routes would also provide a way for people to join family in the UK, without taking dangerous journeys to be reunited with loved ones. Examples from Canada show that sponsorship through existing family or friendship connections is beneficial for integration and wellbeing outcomes (Kaida et al., 2020).

Matching

Where naming is not possible or desired, sponsorship groups need to have substantial involvement in the matching process. This can also be included for community sponsorship

within the existing UNHCR resettlement pathways, as improving and expanding the matching process is crucial for addressing specific needs of sanctuary seekers and communities. A larger pool of applicants and sponsors increases the likelihood of successful matches. Sponsorship groups must have the means to set preferred criteria for the sanctuary seekers they are sponsoring. This can include considerations such as the type of community (e.g. rural or urban), available resources like proximity to cultural and religious sites, and the types of industries in the area. When community groups and sanctuary seeker(s) are matched, pre-arrival contacts are to be facilitated as part of a welcome and orientation process. This supports preparations for welcome and enables community groups to be more involved.

King's College London has seen the benefits of connecting families with resettlement support before arrival through its King's Resettlement Support (KRES) programme. KRES sponsored a Syrian family via a Home Office pilot and offered a pre-departure contact (which is not typically offered in community-led sponsorship) to ease their transition. When the programme expanded to include Homes for Ukraine, KRES connected Ukrainians with local hosts ahead of arrival to start establishing relationships in their new community. Participants reported reduced anxiety and better preparation for life in the UK, while hosts felt more confident to address needs and set expectations for hosting beforehand. However, it should be noted that effective communication between all involved organisations is crucial for setting realistic expectations and ensuring clarity about life in the UK.

Matching through local authorities

In order for naming and matching to be truly scalable, local authorities will need to take a role. One possibility is for local authorities to take on a sponsorship role for people who have not been matched before their arrival. In such cases local authorities could provide temporary accommodation for a maximum of one month while people are matched with a sponsorship group or host. This might look something like the 'super-sponsor' role of the Scottish and Welsh governments in the Homes for Ukraine scheme. This could be particularly important for people who need to leave an emergency situation quickly and would be most suitable for single people or couples rather than for families with children who would ideally have been secured housing from arrival.

Community Sponsorship Licensing Agreements

The naming and matching process could be effectively facilitated through mobilising the expertise and knowledge of experienced sponsorship groups and support organisations and streamlining the bureaucratic process through the introduction of a "Community Sponsorship License Agreement" (CSLA). This has been advocated by the Community Sponsorship Alliance. This has the benefit of streamlining the process of connecting sanctuary seekers with sponsor groups to reduce delays and bureaucracy around the process.

A CSLA would enable experienced sponsoring groups to resettle a certain number of families or individuals without submitting multiple applications. Agreement holders would be able to support smaller groups, without them having to register as charities in their own right, sharing best practice and providing support. Guidelines can also be created for minimum criteria to become a sponsorship group so that sanctuary seekers have access to an agreed standard of support to facilitate their welcome, protection and inclusion in UK society. Sponsorship license agreement holders conduct due diligence, vetting, monitoring and training groups in cooperation with organisations such as Reset.

Work to be done:

- Develop procedures and guidance for naming.
- Increasing awareness and visibility of the potential for naming within political and public spheres will enhance its effectiveness and support.
- Care must be taken to make sure that there is policy coherence between named sponsorship pathways and other immigration and asylum pathways to ensure consistency and fairness.
- Provide standards for developing matching criteria and the processes for involving sponsorship groups
- Consider scope for rematching if arrangements fall through
- Work collaboratively with existing principal lead sponsors to develop the CSLA programme.

3) Welcome and Inclusion

The development of comprehensive welcome and inclusion infrastructure

Participants in our research were unanimous in expressing a need for a national coordination strategy for inclusion and integration. To this end, a truly safe pathway entails sustainable and expansive resources and infrastructures for welcome and inclusion. These welcome provisions must be accessible to all people seeking sanctuary in the UK, regardless of their asylum or migration route. In this way, a strong, universal welcome infrastructure through a safe pathways framework also strengthens existing asylum and resettlement schemes. Welcome and inclusion are to be guided by a unified and comprehensive national strategy, along with provision of resources, that can be implemented flexibly at the local level. This allows for consistency in the baseline for support across the country, and necessary safeguarding, while giving freedom for local authorities and the Voluntary and Community Sector to develop models that are responsive and relevant to the local context.

Welcome and inclusion infrastructure could assist people in accessing:
- physical and mental health support
- work and education
- financial support
- language learning support
- access to cultural life.

The role of local authorities

Collaboration between Volunteer and Community Sector and Local Authorities is essential. While grassroots organisations are effective at facilitating integration and inclusion outcomes due to their community-based approach, they often lack the resources available to local authorities. The involvement of local authorities is important to ensure safeguarding and the maintaining of regulatory standards, as well as the provision of services for people with particularly acute protection needs. Creating partnerships that break down silos and pool resources can lead to more effective and efficient integration strategies. Existing strategic migration partnerships, led by local authorities, can be drawn on and further supported to enable collaboration between central and local government, as well as local organisations and civil society.

Local authorities need comprehensive training to standardise integration practices nationally. This includes creating a learning hub for resource sharing and collaboration across the field. To facilitate this, teams can be established within local authorities to serve as a focal point for LA welcome programmes and to collaborate with VCS. The more local resources such as jobs, schools, and organisations can be leveraged, the more effective the integration process will be. Competency must also be built within local authorities to deliver aspects of integration programmes, such as ESL provision and employment support. Long term, sustainable funding, rather than ad hoc or short-term provision, is essential in order to build infrastructure and expertise and enable local authorities to plan for the future.

Community-led welcome

While the national government provides a structured framework and resources, integration is primarily community-led. Decentralising welcome programmes can enhance community involvement and increase effectiveness by being better tailored to the local context. Just as local authorities need to be adequately and sustainably resourced, grassroots organisations also need to be supported in building infrastructure and expertise in welcome and inclusion initiatives. It is particularly important that where welcome and integration functions are outsourced to volunteer and community groups and organisations, funding is provided to ensure that they can deliver essential functions on behalf of local authorities and provide consistency in support. As with local authorities, there must be comprehensive training for sponsorship groups, and other groups involved in welcome.

Local/regional networks of community sponsorship groups and welcome organisations would provide mutual support and best practice, and allow groups to pool resources across geographic areas, and create more efficient and effective integration strategies. Organisations such as the Good Faith Partnership established Welcome Hubs to provide a wrap-around community support for Ukrainians (Good Faith Partnership, 2022). A similar multi-agency approach, also referred to as Welcome Hubs, was implemented as part of the

Scottish super sponsorship scheme (Scottish Government, 2025)[5]. In addition to networking support available in local areas and regions, these hubs provided a bridge between local authority and communities. They served as a vital triage service to signpost new arrivals to organisations that can address immediate needs upon arrival, and could also connect to local authority provided temporary accommodation for sanctuary seekers before longer-term housing could be acquired. These examples could serve as a starting point for community coordination and connect civil society groups to central government and local authorities.

The research project conference offered the opportunity for several organisations to come together to form the Welcome Coalition, with an agenda to explore options and advocate for better welcome and inclusion practice nationwide. Building on the concept of Welcome Hubs implemented by the Good Faith Partnership, this coalition acknowledges that the support for refugees and asylum seekers in the UK is often fragmented and difficult to navigate. Working together with Neighbourly Lab and the Pickwell Foundation, the Welcome Coalition has formed a community of practice with a national platform, connecting over 1000 formal and informal welcome initiatives in a "network of networks" (Good Faith Partnership, 2024). The coalition is therefore a convenient point of contact for policymakers to engage with and reach all parts of the UK to align welcome and inclusion approaches into a core national strategy.

Access to housing

This policy framework does not make a comprehensive suggestion for a housing policy for the UK because this is a complex, multifaceted issue that can only be solved or developed as part of a broader plan for addressing the shortage of affordable housing in general in the UK. However, there are several ways that finding suitable housing for sanctuary seekers can be made easier. In the case of community sponsorship, housing for the first two years is ensured through the sponsorship agreement. For example, top-up funding for rental payments will increase the pool of housing open to sanctuary seekers. Incentives are to be provided for social landlords, for example through tax breaks or welcome payments. Ultimately, Local Housing Allowance rates need to be increased. Local authorities are expected to work closely with groups to ensure moving-on housing is available. Other barriers to renting appropriate housing must be addressed; for example, MHCLG can work with housing providers to give guidance for renting to people on this scheme. They are also expected to work proactively to reduce stigma and avoid confusion related to the length of the right to remain, so that sanctuary seekers do not face discrimination when trying to access housing after their initial period of support.

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[5] Through the super sponsorship in Scotland, although currently paused, The Scottish Government acted as a 'super sponsor' within the Homes for Ukraine scheme to enable Ukrainians to get visas and travel to the UK before being assigned to a local sponsor group that could provide housing. This expedited arriving safely in the UK and allowed for parts of the sponsorship arrangement to be arranged after arrival.

Transitional support

Participants in this research emphasised the need for long-term support for the integration of sponsored refugees beyond initial resettlement. It is imperative that transitional support include clear directions for how sanctuary seekers can be supported in their move to new accommodation and prepare to access support services independently. Where possible, sanctuary seekers will find more stability when they stay in the area where they first relocated. However, in cases where this is not possible, local/regional community sponsorship networks will enable sponsorship groups to coordinate support for the family in their new area.

Work to be done:

- Establish a baseline of support that is standardised across all local authorities.
- Develop comprehensive training and knowledge bank for local authorities to ensure national integration practices are regulated and standardised.
- Establish a funding mechanism to support volunteer and community groups deliver welcome and integration services.
- Work with local authorities to identify potential housing options that could be accessed by sponsorship groups, address local barriers to accessing housing, and increase allowance for housing sanctuary seekers available to local authorities.
- Local authority planning for moving on to self-supported housing at the end of a sponsorship agreement.
- Work to reduce stigma across housing and services through incentives to support inclusion and welcome activities for sanctuary seekers.
- Establishing clear systems and procedures for those judging eligibility for additional entitlements, such as student loans and reduced fees for services, to streamline the process of accessing entitlements from day 1.
- Develop a communication plan for sharing information about entitlements to local authorities, landlords, social housing providers, education establishments and other service providers sanctuary seekers might encounter to prevent a delay in access to entitlements.
- Continued development of infrastructure and training programmes is needed to support the effective inclusion and integration of community-sponsored sanctuary seekers.

4) Monitoring and Evaluation

Our research highlighted the lack of monitoring and evaluation in previous schemes, which resulted in limited learning to inform future policy. A clear monitoring and evaluation framework could provide a structured approach to learning from experience and sharing best practice. Previous programmes have been criticised for not having a robust enough approach to M&E, and consequently, learning has not meaningfully influenced subsequent approaches to managing forced migration. This safe pathway policy framework will therefore be

strengthened by including a built-in monitoring and evaluation mechanism, that holistically measures integration outcomes of the policy and tracks them over time, from pre-arrival, through their time settling into the UK, and beyond.

Improved M&E measures included outcomes from quality of arrival experience and visa processing to longer term language, health, employment outcomes, economic participation, and social and community inclusion. Although it is useful to collect numerical data on arrivals and understand how establishing a safe pathway affects movement of people who are subject to forced migration, experiences and outcomes for sanctuary seekers and community are more important for ensuring sustainability and scalability of any schemes. Ultimately, the outcomes of the M&E would seek to make connections between how certain practices impact people's general wellbeing.

Organisations that perform functions such as matching and referral, as well as CSLAs are best placed to evaluate their own work and produce their own reports analysing progress made towards a theory of change that they have articulated themselves. Central government can provide a broad framework for the type of M&E they would like to see happen and what kind of information they would like to be reported. Work done by these organisations should also be monitored to assess their effectiveness in meeting the terms of their license or partnership agreements, and to ensure compliance with UK legal frameworks. However, restrictive uniform types of M&E will not capture the diversity of approaches and measures of impact that will be important for innovating within any scheme. Reports and evaluations performed by a variety of organisations can be incorporated into a compact of good practice that is easily accessible for other organisations to share learning.

Outsourcing an overall policy evaluation to an external organisation, such as a university partner, will provide unbiased feedback on the success of the policy and the extent to which it is reaching its goals. This would collate learning from all stakeholders so that tangible suggestions can be made for improvements and developments to support scalability and sustainability. To support this, a clear strategy needs to be put in place for both sharing findings and the learnings generated from these findings, and ways that such learning can be acted on to improve policy implementation in the future.

Work to be done:
- Work with stakeholders to develop a clear framework of responsibilities across organisations.
- Provide training and guidance for organisations to perform internal evaluations of their own work.
- Develop criteria for monitoring and evaluating compliance of different license holders.
- Identify a suitable external organisation to perform full policy implementation evaluations.
- Establish a compact of good practice for sharing knowledge across organisations.
- Agree a strategy for acting on lessons learned to improve implementation of policy.

Conclusion

The impact of forced migration on the lives of people in the UK has been a contentious and emotionally fraught issue for decades. Further stoking the fires of those who want to insulate the UK from the impact of war and conflict elsewhere only serves to divide an increasingly polarised society. This is of benefit to nobody. Providing safe pathways to sanctuary seekers through a system that bring communities together in the UK has much greater potential for strengthening society than policies that take an actively hostile stance towards those in search of safety. Communities are ready to take action, and using this framework to develop an actionable safe pathways policy will provide them the means.

Our research shows that community-led welcome has potential to support an expanded safe pathways framework that can more holistically support inclusion of those that are forcibly displaced. For this to work, sanctuary seekers need to have access to the resources available in the UK to start rebuilding their lives and feel safe. Even if their stay in the UK is temporary, they should have peace of mind to know they will be able to stay for as long as they need protection and that there is a pathway to permanency if necessary. Involvement of community groups in the matching stages from the earliest opportunity is essential for successful inclusion into local life in the UK. Introducing the ability to name those that communities wish to sponsor also has the potential to significantly widen the pool of sponsorship. This would allow community groups to support people they know to be at risk or select those would be the best match for their local environment.

A key insight that is shared by those who partnered in this research is that safe pathways do not end at arrival in the UK. Welcome and inclusion are an important part of a sanctuary seeker's pathway to safety. Local authorities can play a significant role in supporting community groups by ensuring that a comprehensive welcome structure is in place both regionally and locally. Although community groups will be the main day-to-day contact for newly arrived sanctuary seekers, local authorities have an important role to play in ensuring sufficient housing is available to sponsorship groups and for providing transitional support for ongoing pathways to independence beyond the sponsorship agreement.

Above all, monitoring an evaluation will be essential for translating experiences and lessons learned into improved policy. Doing so will improve systems that support sanctuary seekers and help to make the best use of resources that need to be shared across other groups in society. Community sponsorship has a lot of potential for improving the way we support sanctuary seekers through safe pathways, and it is essential that we consolidate the lessons learned by taking an innovative approach in this area to underscore the UK's commitment as a leader in a global response to forced migration.

Appendix 1: Research Methods

This research project was undertaken as a partnership between King's College London and the Community Sponsorship Alliance. It was funded by Research England Policy Support Fund, which was awarded through the King's College London Policy Institute, and was subject to ethical approval from King's College London Research Ethics Committee. The research was designed around a model of co-production, and engaged a range of experts in this field, including people with lived experience of forced migration, practitioners, policy makers and researchers.

A co-creative approach was at the core of this research. Through a series of workshops, online meetings, and a final policy conference, we sought to take a partnership-oriented approach to co-create knowledge from multiple perspectives about what a safe pathways policy framework should include. There were ample opportunities for participants to provide feedback, reflection, learning and the collaborative development of ideas were built into every stage of the research. In the early stages of the research, participants were actively involved in setting the scope and focus of the overall aims. By providing opportunities for in-person meetings we also hoped to facilitate building relationships between different stakeholders. In doing so, they were able achieve a greater understanding of each other's needs and perspectives on safe pathways and were therefore better placed to reach consensus around key issues.

Engaging communities with lived experience was another fundamental part of this research. Prior to formally beginning the research workshop, members of the research team visited potential participants with lived experience in the areas that they lived. Member organisations within the Community Sponsorship Alliance were asked to invite interested people to hear about the research project with a view to contributing. Organisations in Gwynedd, Newtown (Powys), Cardigan, Manchester, and the Greater London area hosted members of the research team to present the project to their beneficiaries and explain rights and benefits for research participants. This ensured that participants were fully informed about the consequences of their involvement before agreeing to attend the workshops. It was felt that these sessions were better in person so that a better relationship could be built with participants with lived experience from the beginning and so we could take time to answer questions they had about the research in a more meaningful way than could be achieved in a relatively impersonal online meeting.

Over three months we hosted three workshops, bringing together stakeholders from multiple organisations and experts by experience (see a full list of these organisations below). Not all stakeholders were able to attend all the workshops, so we also followed up with individual meetings online with those who requested it to allow them to contribute ideas and ask questions at each stage. Each workshop informed a new iteration of the framework, which was presented to participants for reflection and feedback.

The first workshop was held in person at King's College London and set the scope and broad focus areas for discussion throughout the research. Being in person also facilitated making connections between different stakeholders, fostering deeper discussion and co-productive nature of the workshops. The second workshop was conducted online in two separate sessions to allow people to join when they were available. Unfortunately, due to the announcement of the general election prior to this workshop, civil servants were not able to contribute to this stage of the research but were able to contribute again for the final workshop.

The third workshop was run in a hybrid fashion to allow the maximum number of people to attend. This workshop focused on a final review of the policy framework and discussions about next steps towards policy advocacy. Following this workshop on the same day we held the policy conference, which was attended by research participants and other people in the field from research institutes, charitable bodies, the UN, and government. A version of the framework was presented to further generate discussion and feedback. The framework elaborated here is an outcome of these ongoing relationships between a range of people and organisations dedicated to fostering safe pathways to the UK for people that need them.

Appendix 2: List of Participating Organisations

Breaking Barriers

Caritas – Diocese of Salford

Charis Refugees

Citizens UK

Croeso Menai

Edinburgh Refugee Sponsorship Circle

Freedom Card

Holywood Shared Town

King's College London

Pickwell Foundation

Refugee Education UK

RESET

Safe Passage International

The Church of England Diocese

The Salvation Army

Waltham Forest Community Sponsorship Partnership

UK Welcomes Refugees

UNHCR UK

Appendix 3: Additional Resources

The following reports provide more background to context that supports the findings from our research:

British Refugee Council. (2023). *The Human Impact of the Illegal Migration Act and the Rwanda Plan*. British Refugee Council.

IOM. (2017). *Irregular migration and regular pathways, including decent work, labour mobility, recognition of skills and qualifications and other relevant measures* (No. Issue Brief 6). International Organisation for Migration.

RAMFEL. (2024). *Safe Routes to Nowhere: The UK's Broken Promises on Family Reunion*. The Refugee and Migrant Forum of Essex and London (RAMFEL).

RESET. (2022). *The future of community-led welcome: The case for a single UK refugee sponsorship scheme*. RESET Communities and Refugees.

Safe Passage International. (2023). *Routes to Safety: A New Approach to People Crossing the Channel*. Safe Passage International.

UNHCR Resources:

UNHCR. (2019) *Complementary Pathways for Admission of Refugees to Third Countries: Key Considerations*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

UNHCR. (2020). *Refugee Resettlement*. Resettlement and Complementary Pathways Service, Division of International Protection.

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