

## Evaluating the Impact of Community Sponsorship on Refugee Resettlement in Ireland

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**ABSTRACT:** This research aimed to find whether the Community Sponsorship Ireland has positively impacted on Refugee Resettlement in Ireland. To explore this, the research drew into a range of primary and secondary sources. It also incorporated the refugee stories in Ireland and interviews with three Community Sponsorship beneficiaries, national support organizations, and members of a sponsorship group.

This research is structured into four parts. The first part provides an overview of Community Sponsorship in Ireland, including its definition, historical background, and the policy framework. The second part explores the impact of community sponsorship, with a particular focus on its social and economic effects on refugees. The third part analyzes the challenges and limitations of the CSI. Finally, the fourth part offers recommendations for strengthening this initiative in Ireland.

The finding suggests that CSI has played a significant role in resettling refugees. It fostered strong partnerships among the government, civil society organizations, and grassroots support groups, creating a collaborative framework to assist and integrate refugees into Irish society. Despite these strengths, the program faced notable challenges. These include the difficulty of finding suitable accommodation, limited awareness and cooperation from relevant government bodies, and the slow pace of refugee family reintegration into the local community. To ensure the continued success of the program, this research highlights the need for greater government cooperation, particularly from local authorities, in supporting accommodation efforts. It also emphasizes the importance of raising awareness about CSI among relevant government departments and recommends the implementation of regular monitoring and evaluation to identify ongoing challenges and strengthen the long-term impact of the program.

### INTRODUCTION

European countries, including Ireland, have been struggling with the immigration crisis, particularly since 2015 and 2016 when the Balkan refugee route opened.<sup>1</sup> This led to approximately 2.5 million asylum applications during those two years<sup>2</sup>. Subsequently, the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have further intensified refugee movements toward European countries.<sup>3</sup> Illegal immigration remains a significant challenge within the EU. In response, the EU has been attempting to legalize immigration through various approaches. One promising method for both legal migration and the positive integration of migrants is community sponsorship. This initiative originated in Canada in the 1970s and has since been adopted within the context of different national systems by the UK and several EU countries, including Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

CSI was established in 2018. As a community-driven approach, it empowers local communities to play a key role in resettling individuals affected by war and persecution in their home countries. This Program not only allows states to share responsibilities with communities and civil society, but it also serves as a powerful tool for the effective integration of refugees at the local level. According to the author's findings, no prior research has specifically examined community sponsorship in Ireland. This study, as the first of its kind, aims to evaluate the impact of community sponsorship on refugees in Ireland.

To achieve this aim, the research is structured into four parts. The first part provides an overview of Community Sponsorship in Ireland, including its definition, historical background, and the policy framework. The second part explores the impact of community

<sup>1</sup> Boštjan Nedoh, 'Mass Migrations as a Messianic Event? Rereading Agamben's State of Exception in Light of the Refugee Crisis in Europe' (2022) 18 *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 272, 272.

<sup>2</sup> Etienne Piguet, 'The "Refugee Crisis" in Europe: Shortening Distances, Containment and Asymmetry of Rights—a Tentative Interpretation of the 2015–16 Events' (2021) 34 *Journal of refugee studies* 1577, 276.

<sup>3</sup> Matías Ibañez Sales, 'The Refugee Crisis' double Standards: Media Framing and the Proliferation of Positive and Negative Narratives During the Ukrainian and Syrian Crises', 1.

<sup>4</sup> "Community Sponsorship Ireland A Guide for Prospective Sponsors" (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, December 4, 2024), <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/317752/e2f17d6c-8863-4785-8f2b-3e023eb5fad5.pdf>. P.3.

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sponsorship, with a particular focus on its social and economic effects on refugees. The third part analyzes the challenges and limitations of the community sponsorship model. Finally, the fourth part offers recommendations for strengthening the CSI. This research is based on desk research, including the review of primary and secondary sources such as journals, legislation, and immigration organization websites. It also examines refugee stories in Ireland and incorporates interviews with three Community Sponsorship beneficiaries, two national support organizations, and three members of a sponsorship group.

## Chapter 1: Overview of Community Sponsorship in Ireland

### 1. The Concept of Community Sponsorship

Community sponsorship is defined as "a modality of welcoming asylum seekers based on the shared responsibility of private actors and public authorities,"<sup>5</sup> or as "a community-led way for ordinary people to welcome refugee families and support them in settling into their local communities in Ireland."<sup>6</sup> This model encourages public participation in supporting those who have fled war and persecution.<sup>7</sup> CSI is built on five key principles including empowerment of both the community and refugees, active engagement of refugees in their own resettlement, enhancement of existing resettlement mechanisms, creation of partnerships between the government and civil society, and protection of refugees based on equality and non-discrimination.<sup>8</sup>

### 2. History of Community Sponsorship in Ireland

The Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI)<sup>9</sup> played a significant role in encouraging Irish authorities to establish CSI. GRSI hosted a meeting in Canada in February 2018, where they provided information and support for developing the program. GRSI members also visited Ireland several times to offer guidance<sup>10</sup>. CSI was established in 2018 as a complementary model to Ireland's traditional refugee resettlement program. It operates under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) within the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY).<sup>11</sup> Initially launched as a pilot, CSI was officially adopted by the Irish government in November 2019.<sup>12</sup>

Due to Ireland's early involvement, sharing of expertise, and support for promoting the initiative, the IRPP received an international award<sup>13</sup>. From its launch up to October 2024, CSI has formed around 60 Community Sponsorship Groups (CSGs) and resettled nearly 40 families. According to the 2024–2027 Action Plan, Ireland aims to resettle 100 families (25 per year) through community sponsorship.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Policy Framework

Community sponsorship is recognized by the European Commission as a legal migration tool under the New Pact on Asylum and Migration<sup>15</sup>, which Ireland, as an EU member state, is obliged to follow. Although there is no specific Irish legislation exclusively addressing community sponsorship, its legal foundation is derived from Section 59 of the International Protection Act 2015, which covers Programme Refugees and Temporary Protection. Under this section, a programme refugee is granted permission to enter and reside in Ireland as part of an organized resettlement initiative.<sup>16</sup> Refugees supported through CSI are categorized as Programme Refugees. While the Act does not explicitly mention community sponsorship, it provides the legal framework necessary for the resettlement of refugees through such initiatives. Beneficiaries of CSI have the same rights and entitlements as Irish citizens upon arrival. After three years of residency, they are eligible to apply for Irish citizenship.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Carlotta Duken and Lucas Rasche, "Towards a European Model for Community Sponsorship," March 31, 2021, [https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-hsog/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/3802/file/210331\\_Duken\\_Rasche\\_Community\\_sponsors.pdf](https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-hsog/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/3802/file/210331_Duken_Rasche_Community_sponsors.pdf). P 2.

<sup>6</sup> "Community Sponsorship | Doras," accessed March 20, 2025, <https://doras.org/programmes/community-sponsorship>.

<sup>7</sup> "Community Sponsorship Ireland A Guide for Prospective Sponsors." P.3.

<sup>8</sup> "Community Sponsorship Ireland Initial Policy Framework" (n.d.), <https://www.redcross.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CSI-Policy-Framework-WEB.pdf>. PP. 5-4.

<sup>9</sup> The Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI), a joint initiative led by the Canadian government, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the Open Society Foundations, the Giustra Foundation and the University of Ottawa, was established in 2016. It aims to promote private community sponsorship across the globe. "Ireland Wins Award for Community Sponsorship of Refugees," The Irish Times, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/ireland-wins-award-for-community-sponsorship-of-refugees-1.4046852>.

<sup>10</sup> Community Sponsorship Ireland Initial Policy Framework. P. iii.

<sup>11</sup> "Community Sponsorship Ireland - Irish Red Cross," June 22, 2022, <https://www.redcross.ie/community-sponsorship-ireland/>, <https://www.redcross.ie/community-sponsorship-ireland/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Community Sponsorship Ireland A Guide for Prospective Sponsors." P.3.

<sup>13</sup> "Ireland Wins Award for Community Sponsorship of Refugees."

<sup>14</sup> "Community Sponsorship Ireland Programme Review" (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, November 15, 2023), <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/292632/1ac417b9-4c70-482b-9f9a-d5d1052d7166.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Duken and Rasche, "Towards a European Model for Community Sponsorship." P2.

<sup>16</sup> "International Protection Act 2015," Pub. L. No. 66 (2015),

<https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/act/2015/66/eng/enacted/a6615.pdf>. P 64.

<sup>17</sup> "Community Sponsorship Ireland A Guide for Prospective Sponsors." P.4.

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Several guidance documents further support the implementation of CSI by clarifying the rights and responsibilities of resettled individuals and participating groups. These include the Community Sponsorship Ireland: A Guide for Prospective Sponsors, Community Sponsorship Ireland: Resettled Persons Privacy Notice, and the Community Sponsorship Ireland: A Guide for Sponsors' Settlement Planning.<sup>18</sup>

### Chapter 2: The Functioning of Community Sponsorship and Its Impact in Ireland

#### 1. The Functioning of Community Sponsorship in Ireland

CSI supports refugees who currently reside outside of Ireland and have been identified by the UNHCR and accepted by the Irish government as individuals in need of resettlement. The UNHCR refers cases to Ireland, which has committed to offering safety and protection to refugees through its resettlement program, including CSI. Since CSI beneficiaries have already been recognized by the UNHCR as refugees, they are not required to apply for refugee status upon arrival in Ireland.<sup>19</sup> IRRPP is responsible for processing the cases referred by the UNHCR. At the national level, CSI is led by the Irish Red Cross<sup>20</sup> in partnership with non-governmental Regional Support Organizations (RSOs), including the Irish Refugee Council<sup>21</sup>, Doras<sup>22</sup>, and Nasc<sup>23</sup>. The Open Community<sup>24</sup> in a partnership with the mentioned RSOs, IRPP, UNHCR and Amnesty International also provides support and guidance to Irish Community Sponsorship movement.<sup>25</sup>

These organizations not only receive and review CSGs' applications and provide initial feedback, but also offer continued support, advice, and training to CSGs throughout the sponsorship journey. Each RSO is responsible for working with CSGs within specific, pre-assigned counties.<sup>26</sup>

CSG plays a central role in CSI. A CSG consists of a minimum of five individuals, all over the age of 18, who commit to sponsoring a refugee family. CSGs can be made up of faith-based organizations, trade unions, sports associations, or any type of community group. Each CSG agrees to provide a range of support to newly arrived refugees, including financial, social, emotional, and resettlement assistance. CSGs are required to coordinate with RSOs for training and guidance in preparing applications and supporting refugee families under CSI.<sup>27</sup> When sponsoring a refugee family, each CSG must create a detailed settlement plan, with help from their assigned RSO. This plan must outline the group's structure, types of support to be provided, and the financial and non-financial assistance intended to help the refugees integrate successfully.

CSGs must formally commit to securing housing for a minimum of 24 months and providing at least 18 months of support. They are also required to have at least €10,000 in available resources, of which a maximum of €2,000 may be in-kind contributions, as per CSI guidelines.<sup>28</sup> In addition to the settlement plan, CSGs are expected to respect data protection and privacy laws and develop a Child Safeguarding Policy to ensure the safety and well-being of refugee children.<sup>29</sup>

#### 2. The Impact of Community Sponsorship Ireland on Refugee Resettlement

CSI is designed to be one of the most impactful initiatives for refugee resettlement and their integration into Irish society. According to Community Sponsorship Ireland: A Guide for Sponsors' Settlement Planning, CSGs are required to meet all necessary conditions

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<sup>18</sup> "Irish Refugee Protection Programme," January 29, 2021, <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ede36-irish-refugee-protection-programme/>.

<sup>19</sup> "Community Sponsorship Ireland A Guide for Prospective Sponsors." PP. 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> Since its founding in 1939, the Irish Red Cross has been dedicated to serving people in need whether they are in Ireland or caught up in humanitarian crises in countries and regions throughout the globe. Today the Irish Red Cross maintains an active network of over 3,000 volunteers at 75 branch locations based in large and small communities throughout the Republic of Ireland. "Community Sponsorship Ireland," accessed March 26, 2025, <https://www.communitysponsorshipireland.ie/>.

<sup>21</sup> The Irish Refugee Council provides services and support for people seeking protection and people recognised as refugees in Ireland, and advocate for humane and dignified protection procedures and responses to people fleeing persecution. "Community Sponsorship Ireland."

<sup>22</sup> Founded in 2000 by a group of passionate volunteers in response to the establishment of the Direct Provision system, Doras has been working tirelessly since to promote and protect the rights of migrants and refugees in Ireland. Doras supports thousands of people in Limerick and across the country, on issues of immigration and international protection, homelessness, domestic violence, trafficking for labour exploitation, employment, health and wellbeing, discrimination and more. "Community Sponsorship Ireland."

<sup>23</sup> Nasc, the Migrant and Refugee Rights Centre was founded in the year 2000 to provide supports to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and to advocate for their rights. Through our work, Nasc strives to promote equality and inclusion, and ensure that migrants have access to their rights and opportunities in Irish society.

<sup>24</sup> The Open Community CLG engages and supports people all over Ireland to welcome refugees into their local communities. "About The Open Community," the open community, accessed April 16, 2025, <https://theopencommunity.ie/about-the-open-community/>.

<sup>25</sup> "About The Open Community."

<sup>26</sup> "Community Sponsorship Ireland Programme Review"; "Community Sponsorship Ireland."

<sup>27</sup> Community Sponsorship Ireland Initial Policy Framework. P. iv.

<sup>28</sup> Community Sponsorship Ireland Initial Policy Framework.

<sup>29</sup> "Community Sponsorship Ireland A Guide for Prospective Sponsors." P.11.

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to ensure the successful resettlement of CSI beneficiaries, both before and after their arrival. The CSGs' resettlement plan must demonstrate their capacity to manage all aspects of the resettlement process from welcoming refugees upon arrival to providing ongoing support and promoting integration. Before the refugees arrive, CSGs are required to raise sufficient funds as per CSI guidelines, complete the necessary preparatory training, and develop a child safeguarding policy to protect refugee children from potential harm. They must also secure accommodation for a minimum of 18 months and provide essential household items.

Upon the arrival of the resettled beneficiaries in Ireland, CSGs are responsible not only for meeting and greeting them at the airport but also for ensuring that interpretation services are available and that the refugees are safely escorted to their new homes. They must provide information regarding the role and responsibilities of the CSG, lease obligations, health and safety procedures, and available emergency support.

Furthermore, CSGs should assist the resettled individuals in gaining access to mobile phone services, internet connectivity, and in setting up a bank account. Beneficiaries must also be informed about the ongoing support available from the Irish government. CSGs are expected to guide them in accessing community activities, medical care, language training, education, and employment opportunities. They must also ensure that refugees can obtain necessary documentation and services, including the Irish Residence Permit (IRP), Personal Public Service Number (PPSN), medical cards, driving licenses, social welfare support, healthcare access, English language classes, and more.<sup>30</sup>

CSI is not supported by a single entity but is backed by a broad network of community efforts.<sup>31</sup> The wider community plays a direct role in CSI, helping to reduce the burden on the government while also offering meaningful support for refugee resettlement and integration. CSI not only benefits the sponsored families but also provides an opportunity for local residents many of whom may never have met a refugee before to connect and show solidarity.<sup>32</sup> It enables community members to express compassion and cooperation with individuals who have experienced war and persecution. There are many inspiring examples of Irish community members who take pride in their support for refugees through CSI. For instance, Mary Coffey, a local GP in Kells who helped resettle a Syrian family, shared: "I think it's one of the most important things I've ever done in my life. I feel something in my life and in my person has expanded because of it."<sup>33</sup>

CSI has had a profoundly positive impact on its beneficiaries in Ireland. It has ensured their safety and security while providing them with an opportunity to rebuild their lives in a stable and supportive environment.<sup>34</sup> It has helped secure housing, facilitated access to health services, education including English courses for adults and schooling for children<sup>35</sup>, employment, and community support. Moreover, CSI has been particularly effective in promoting integration in rural and smaller communities. CSGs, who often represent their local areas, have offered invaluable support through direct, personal engagement. The sponsorship model has fostered greater community cooperation and has significantly reduced the likelihood of discrimination or mistreatment against resettled refugee families.

### Chapter 3: The Challenges of Community Sponsorship Ireland (CSI)

Based on the experiences shared by resettled refugees, as well as interviews conducted with CSI beneficiaries, members of CSGs and Refugee Support Organizations (RSOs), CSI has faced several key challenges, as outlined below:

#### 1. Accommodation Crisis

Due to the ongoing housing crisis in Ireland, finding suitable accommodation that matched the size and needs of refugee families proved to be one of the most difficult aspects of the CSI initiative. This issue intensified significantly following the influx of Ukrainian refugees to Ireland. Landlords have often been reluctant to show solidarity and cooperate with CSGs and refugee families particularly in the case of single refugees. Convincing landlords to accept Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) support has also been challenging. Moreover, there have been cases where CSGs paid rent for several months in advance for accommodation, even though the refugee families had not yet arrived in Ireland.<sup>36</sup> The government lacks a system to cover rental costs during the interim

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<sup>30</sup> "Community Sponsorship Ireland A Guide for Sponsors' Settlement Planning" (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, December 2024), <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/317754/abc806c1-0d73-49d5-a470-08a0e1443d18.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Eleanor Burnhill, "Communities Preparing to Host around 20 Syrian Families," July 25, 2021, <https://www.rte.ie/news/2021/0725/1237144-irish-communities-preparing-to-host-20-syrian-families/>.

<sup>32</sup> "'A Beautiful Experience': Wicklow Locals Welcome Refugee Families," The Irish Times, accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2022/12/30/a-beautiful-experience-wicklow-locals-welcome-refugee-families/>.

<sup>33</sup> "Stories of Success – Community Sponsorship Ireland," accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.communitysponsorship.ie/stories-of-success/>.

<sup>34</sup> "Navan Group to Sponsor and Welcome Syrian Refugee Family | Meath Chronicle," accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.meathchronicle.ie/2020/10/21/navan-group-to-sponsor-and-welcome-syrian-refugee-family/>.

<sup>35</sup> "Kells Community Sponsors Syrian Refugee Family in Ireland | Meath Chronicle," accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.meathchronicle.ie/2020/06/20/kells-community-sponsors-syrian-refugee-family-in-ireland/>.

<sup>36</sup> "A Group of Volunteers Raise Funds to Try to Resettle Refugees in Dublin 8 - Dublin Inquirer," accessed March 3, 2025, <https://dublininquirer.com/2020/08/19/a-group-of-volunteers-raise-funds-to-try-to-resettle-refugees-in-dublin-8/>.

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period before families arrive, placing a heavy financial burden on CSGs. Additionally, in some cases, due to the unavailability of local housing, CSGs were forced to secure accommodation outside their own communities. This limited the ability of group members to regularly visit and support the refugee families. At the same time, it hindered the refugees' ability to build relationships within the host community, reducing their access to local services, social networks, and opportunities to integrate.

### **2. Lack of Awareness About CSI in Relevant Government Departments**

Many public sector employees including those in the Department of Social Protection, local authorities, and the Health Service Executive lack sufficient awareness and understanding of CSI. As a result, refugee families and CSG members often encountered difficulties when trying to process applications or access services. In many cases, assistance from RSOs was required simply to explain CSI to government staff. This lack of awareness led to significant delays in processing vital documentation and services. For instance, some refugee families waited two to three months to receive their Public Services Card, which then delayed access to healthcare, HAP, and social welfare. These bureaucratic delays not only placed financial pressure on CSGs but also consumed valuable time that could have been spent empowering and engaging with refugee families.

### **3. Slow Integration Process**

The host community and CSG members play a critical role in helping refugee families integrate into Irish society. However, several families faced challenges in connecting with their new communities, largely due to being housed outside the CSG's locality. This physical separation weakened the support network and reduced the refugees' ability to participate in community life. Although many refugees expressed a desire to engage in local cultural activities to foster a sense of belonging, they were unable to do so due to location constraints. Additionally, limited access to English language classes further hindered integration. In some areas, refugees had to endure long commutes to attend language courses, or could only attend classes once a week due to limited availability. These factors significantly impacted their ability to learn English and communicate effectively within the community, delaying their integration and independence.

## **CHAPTER 4: RECOMMENDATION**

Given the challenges faced by CSI, this study offers the following recommendations for the further improvement of Community Sponsorship in Ireland

### **1. Accommodation**

The government should establish a system through which rent and deposit costs are covered until CSI beneficiaries are officially settled into their accommodation. In addition, local authorities should prioritize applications from CSI beneficiaries and ensure they are processed promptly. Furthermore, all CSI beneficiaries should be included in the rent supplement scheme allowing up to 35% above the rent limits, without requiring case-by-case evaluations. This policy would not only ease the financial burden on CSGs but also help them secure suitable accommodation within their communities in a timely manner.

### **2. Increase in Minimum Fundraising Requirement**

According to the CSI guidelines for prospective sponsors, CSGs must currently raise a minimum of €10,000 for a refugee family, or €5,000 for an individual. However, research findings indicate that this amount is insufficient. In some cases, CSGs have spent over €30,000 on a single family's resettlement due to unforeseen expenses. As a result, CSGs often spend a significant portion of their time on fundraising, with little to no government financial contribution. This shows that the current minimum fundraising requirement is unrealistic. It is recommended that the minimum amount be increased from €10,000 to €30,000, and that the government provide grants to support CSGs in reaching this target. Doing so would prevent additional unforeseen challenges for both the CSGs and CSI beneficiaries.

### **3. Raising Awareness Among Government Employees About CSI**

It is essential to conduct awareness-raising programs within relevant government departments. The IRPP and RSOs should take responsibility for informing departments such as the Health Service Executive (HSE), local authorities, and the Department of Social Protection and other relevant authorities about CSI and its guidelines. A fast-track system should be developed to facilitate the processing of applications for CSI beneficiaries. Additionally, the IRPP could assign focal points within these departments to support other staff and ensure timely handling of refugee-related matters.

## **CONCLUSION**

Community Sponsorship, which originated in Canada, has proven to be an effective initiative for supporting legal migration and facilitating the positive integration and settlement of migrants within host communities. It has allowed grassroots communities to actively participate in the resettlement and integration of refugees in their local areas. In Ireland, CSI, as a relatively new program, has played a significant role in resettling refugees, particularly those fleeing conflict in countries such as Syria and Afghanistan. CSI has fostered strong partnerships among the government, civil society organizations, and grassroots support groups, creating a collaborative framework to assist and integrate refugees into Irish society. CSI beneficiaries have been formally recognized as

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Programme Refugees under the International Protection Act 2015 and are granted the same rights and entitlements as Irish citizens upon arrival. Despite these strengths, the program faces notable challenges. These include the difficulty of finding suitable accommodation, limited awareness and cooperation from relevant government bodies, and the slow pace of refugee family reintegration into the local community. As CSGs carry the majority of the responsibility for refugee resettlement, these challenges have placed a significant burden on them. In some instances, the pressure has demotivated members from forming or continuing CSGs to support new refugee arrivals. If left unaddressed, these issues may negatively impact the long-term success and sustainability of CSI in Ireland. To ensure the continued success of the program, this research highlights the need for greater government cooperation, particularly from local authorities, in supporting accommodation efforts. It also emphasizes the importance of raising awareness about CSI among relevant government departments and recommends the implementation of regular monitoring and evaluation to identify ongoing challenges and strengthen the long-term impact of the program.

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