

COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP FOR RESETTLED REFUGEES

CONCEPT NOTE

In 2020, the Belgian State launched a pilot project on community sponsorship, which is an integral part of the Belgian resettlement programme¹. Here, Belgium is following the international trend of focusing on civil society in order to foster the growth of the national resettlement programme and the integration of resettled refugees in the host communities.

1. What is community sponsorship?

There is actually no general definition of community sponsorship. Indeed, the content of community sponsorship programmes can vary enormously depending on the national or even regional context. For example, the financial investment may differ greatly from one program to another. In Great Britain, sponsors must cover all costs related to the stay and integration for a period of two years. In other countries, sponsors may rely, in whole or in part, on public financial aid granted to any refugee. In this case, the financial responsibility of the sponsoring group is less; the sponsoring group is more concerned with the social and psychological well-being of the individuals. Another observed difference between the programs relates to the selection and matching of sponsored refugees. In some countries, this is entirely managed by the authorities, while in others, NGOs are involved. In other countries, it is the sponsoring groups themselves that manage this.

This flexibility makes it possible to apply sponsorship programmes in very different situations and to adapt them to the local, regional or national context. In Canada, for example, where there is a large, socially engaged and well-established refugee community, refugees already in Canada may decide on their own to sponsor specific individuals to help family members in need.

However, **it is essential that society is involved in the resettlement of people and takes responsibility for providing support to newcomers.**

In Belgium, community sponsorship means that a group motivated citizens is committed to receiving and guiding resettled refugees during their first year in Belgium.

¹ More information on the Belgian resettlement programme can be found on the website <https://fedasil.be/en/resettlement> or in the "Resettlement in Belgium" brochure available online at: <https://fedasil.be/en/publications>

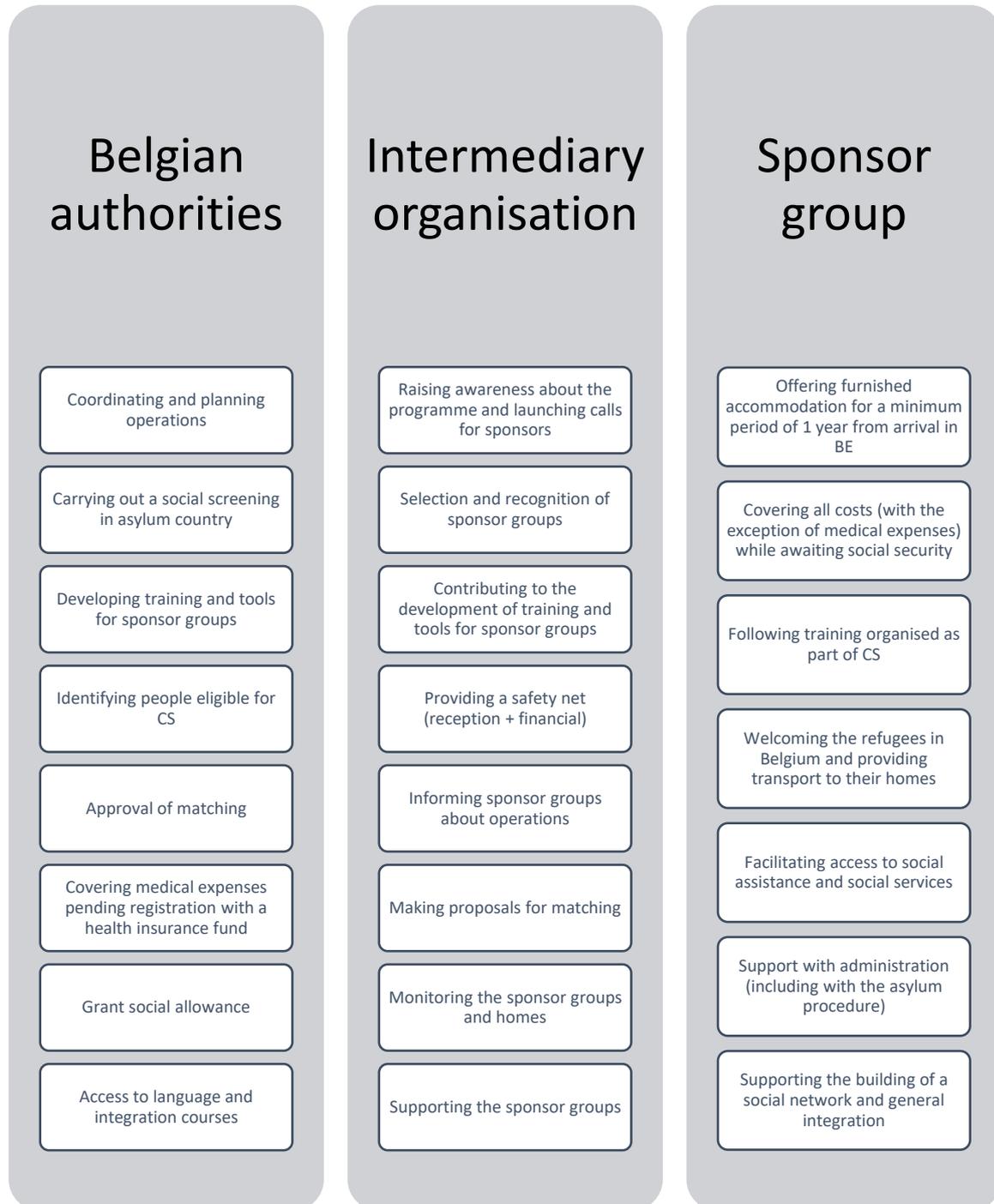
2. Why a sponsorship program in Belgium?

The programme was developed by Fedasil to bring committed reception groups into contact with refugees and to give them a meaningful role in the reception and integration process for vulnerable newcomers. In addition, *the* United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) encourages countries to develop sponsorship programmes to increase the number of places for people in need of international protection. Moreover, in Belgium, main objectives of the Belgian community sponsorship programme are also:

- Diversify legal and safe routes for people in need of international protection;
- Diversify and develop the expertise of actors from the civil society;
- Strengthen capacity in society and contribute to developing a positive image of refugees and newcomers in Belgium;
- Promote the integration process for newcomers and their anchoring in the local community through neighbourhood involvement.

3. Division of roles between the different actors involved in the Belgian community sponsorship programme

In addition to the actors involved in the standard resettlement procedure (UNHCR and IOM, mainly), the following actors play a crucial role in the implementation of the community sponsorship programme: the Belgian government, the intermediary organisations and the sponsor or reception groups. Below is an overview of their responsibilities:



* Social allowance or equivalent benefit is a financial allowance for people who do not have sufficient means of subsistence. Any person legally residing in the country is entitled, under certain conditions, to such social support, including (resettled/sponsored) refugees.

4. Community sponsorship vs “standard” resettlement

Housing

People sponsored by a local reception group are immediately taken care of upon arrival: they are welcomed in a home provided and prepared by the reception group. This differs from reception processes, whereby the Belgian State provides temporary accommodation for resettled refugees in collective centres and/or individual reception centres.

Social and financial support

Sponsored refugees, like all recognised refugees in Belgium, are entitled to social and financial support. Resettled refugees in the standard process (collective centre and then individual housing) can apply for such support once they have left the official reception network of Fedasil. Sponsored refugees do not make use of such reception and can therefore apply almost immediately upon arrival².

Guidance

Recognised refugees in Belgium can go to a PSWC³ for social guidance. A social assistant is then assigned, who helps with administration and all kinds of questions and demands the newcomer may have. Usually, this contact takes place by appointment. Refugees who are in Belgium as part of community sponsorship also receive this support from professionals.

In addition, they can naturally also contact the sponsor group. Together, they agree on how to make contact, how often, etc...,

Integration

Every newcomer with a legal status in Belgium has access to integration services, such as language lessons and integration courses. The PSWC's social assistant usually facilitates access to these services. The same is true in the case of sponsorship, but the host group can provide additional support, such as registering for classes or practicing speaking the language together.

5. Who is eligible for community sponsorship?

Individuals who have been selected for resettlement to Belgium and who give their express consent will be considered for the community sponsorship program. Only those for whom a good ‘match’ is found will actually be taken care of by a sponsor group.

6. Who can become a sponsor?

Any group of at least five individuals may apply to sponsor a resettled person or family. These members are screened on the basis of their motivation, relevant experience and professional activities. A criminal record check is requested.

7. How does community sponsorship work?

Identification and selection of refugees

Individuals proposed and selected for resettlement must indicate whether they consent to be hosted and supported by a host group instead of following the standard reception route. Only those who give consent are proposed for community sponsorship.

² This application can be made as soon as the persons are registered on the waiting list, i.e. after registration with the Immigration Office (which usually takes place a few days after arrival).

³ PSWC: Public Social Welfare Centre.

Matching

Fedasil shares an anonymised list of all people eligible for sponsorship with the intermediary organisations. This list contains information about family composition, possible family members in Belgium, reception needs and all other aspects relevant for the determination of an adapted reception location. On the basis of this information and the information about the sponsor group (interests, expertise, language skills, etc.), the home and the location, the intermediary organisation will submit a matching proposal to Fedasil's approval.

People for whom no match is found will follow the standard reception process.

BELCO

Prior to the people's departure, Fedasil will organise the Belgian Cultural Orientation or BELCO⁴ training for all selected refugees to be resettled. Ideally, the training for the sponsored refugees will be organised (partially) separately, so that tailored information can be exchanged and an initial digital meeting can take place with the sponsor group.

Transfer and arrival

The transfer is organised in collaboration with the International Organization for Migrations in line with the same procedures as for a standard resettlement process⁵. Upon arrival, one or more members of the sponsor group will await the people at the airport to take them to their new home.

Residency in Belgium

The sponsor group is committed to monitoring and supporting the newcomers for one year. After that, the official sponsorship comes to an end and the people involved will choose to what extent this contact may continue.

⁴ BELCO stands for the Belgian Cultural Orientation Training. More information about this training can be found on the website or in the "Resettlement in Belgium" brochure.

⁵ See the "Resettlement in Belgium" brochure.