

Sidmouth Companions

East Devon Radio Interview with Brigid McSmith, the Group Leader of the Community Sponsorship Group: Sidmouth Companions

Brigid McSmith was recently interviewed on East Devon Radio's Sunday Morning Show by Howard James about Sidmouth Companions - a Community Sponsorship Group helping to resettle a Syrian family in Sidmouth.

Howard James:

"In these troubled times around the world, there are local organisations who feel the need to help those who, through war or persecution, are coming to the UK for resettlement. One such group are the Syrians who have fled due to civil war in their country are being helped to settle locally. Let's talk to a lady who is doing all of that. How did you get involved?"

Brigid McSmith:

"Quite a few people in our parish, the Catholic church in Sidmouth, we really wanted to do something to help the fleeing Syrians. We could donate: goods and money. We just felt that there was something more that we wanted to do. We really didn't know how to go about it.

"In 2015, Pope Francis announced that he would like to see every parish in the world welcome a refugee family. And that was great, but we still didn't know how to go about that. Our diocese - the Diocese of Plymouth - was setting up a Caritas branch of the diocese which deals with the charitable works in the communities. Caritas had an event where they invited a neighbouring community sponsorship to come and have a stall. So, I went along and I spoke to the group leader. She gave me a leaflet which outlined what community sponsorship was about and what you would need to do to welcome a family. I took it back to the parish and I said you know: I think we can do this. The parish priest was totally onboard - really enthusiastic about it. We took it to the parish group and they said yes. We think the community will really be involved with this and support it. It went on from there really."

Howard James:

"Why Community Sponsorship Group and Sidmouth Companions?
Why the two names?"

Brigid McSmith:

"Community Sponsorship is a Home Office approved route - it is a safe and legal route for refugees to come to the UK. Community sponsorship is the umbrella. Last year, there was 150 Community Sponsorship Groups who had welcomed families and so each sponsorship group has its own name and we are Sidmouth Companions. They are all unique groups who welcome families. They all have to have a lead sponsor. We have Caritas as our lead sponsor. You also have to the local authority approval. So In our

case, East Devon and Devon District Council had to approve the application and be on board and they were amazing. Devon County Council Resettlement team are amazing. Really supportive.

Howard James:

“When did it all start?”

Brigid McSmith:

“For us, it started in 2019 when the priest gave the go-ahead. He asked us to get a small group together and initially it was just within the Catholic church. We did our research and very much initially, it was almost an academic exercise because the Home Office specify what the Community Sponsorship Group has to do and what they have to provide.

“Looking at access to GP services - was there room for new patients at the GPs? Could the schools accommodate children and and if so, what age groups did they have space for? How would English language be provided? What property would be available to the family? It has to be available for two years.

“So, we researched all that information and benefits - how families would have access to benefits. We put it all in one place; documented it, and said actually this is something that we can do. We were now sure that we could provide what was needed for a family.”

Howard James

“None of this of course is straightforward. Was it very daunting for you when you first got to grips with it?”

Brigid McSmith:

“I was very lucky and most community sponsorships are. There is a national organisation called Reset who are commissioned by the Home Office to help set up Community Sponsorship Groups. They train you and they also provided a mentor. I had a mentor who repeatedly said to me don't look at the big picture; you do it in stages, if you look at the big picture, it would be too daunting.

“The first stage is very much this academic exercise which I spoke about. I kept on saying but what, but what. She said no - just keep what you are doing. Keep focused. And that really worked well until we went onto the next stage.”

Howard James:

“We are talking Syrian refugees here. Does that coincide with when you actually got going? You mentioned 2019. Was it then that you realised that there were serious problems there and you needed to help these people as quickly as possible?”

Brigid McSmith:

“That’s what influenced us. Community sponsorship came from Canada and so it came to this country in 2016 and the first families that were resettled were Syrians. And that was the case very much so in 2019 when we started our preparation.

“It has actually now widened to other communities and other countries. It is not just Syrian families now. It is other. That’s the beauty of it: it grows and it develops and it works really well.

Howard James:

I guess that you are talking about the war in Ukraine - Ukrainian refugees and possibly the Albanians too.

Brigid McSmith:

“There is different routes for Ukrainians coming to the UK. Reset - the national body that the Home Office has commissioned - they have got all the information on all the routes that are safe and legal to help the people coming in. If anyone is interested that is the first point of call I would say.”

Howard James:

“I can understand whether it be Syrians, Ukrainians, Albanians coming over to this country to settle - I am looking at the difference really between say a city or a town or even a village. Because obviously, there is a great difference in a city or town, there is plenty of things for people to do. If they are settled in East Devon, which is very rural, are there going to be more problems by them settling in a smaller area, than somewhere like a big city, like for example Exeter or Plymouth?”

Brigid McSmith:

“It’s a really interesting question Howard. Every family is unique. Some families would like to come to a quiet place where they can find peace and to be settled and others may want to come and be in the centre of a city. It is very much on what the family like. When you think about the process - a family are matched to a community sponsorship group before they come - so they have already been given refugee status.

“They are told that there is an option of you going to Sidmouth in Devon for example. If you can imagine if you want your children to be safe and if you want your children to be educated - that’s your priority. And so, you may not give a great deal of attention to the location where you are going to be settled because the point is they are going to be safe.

“Families do have a choice. They can say no we would rather be in a city. But in a lot of circumstances, the families will say yes please. They are so desperate to get their children and their families safe.

“Once they are here, they are not tied to a location. That’s the beauty of it. The more the family are empowered to be independent, they then have choices and they could then

move onto somewhere else if they wanted to. It's a starting point for them - it is really important point to get them safe and settled and then they can make their way and make their choices."

Howard James:

"How are you funded?"

Brigid McSmith:

"The groups fund themselves. Initially the Home Office specify that you have to have £9000. The Catholic Church in Sidmouth was really generous - it gave us the £9000 to start us off. The rest has been fundraising. The whole community in Sidmouth has been so generous, not just financially: with their time and with their welcome. It's been absolutely amazing. Groups are self-funding. There are grants available for some groups. We have been able to rely on donations and fundraising events."

Howard James:

Fundraising events

"What have you got planned for maybe the rest of this year? I know that there is not a lot of time before the end of this year. What have you got planned for this year and next year?"

Brigid McSmith:

"We are coming to the end of the community sponsorship because groups are required to secure accommodation for the families for two years, but to support them for one. Most groups would support the family for two years. In February of next year, Sidmouth Companions we will be disbanding as a group. But we still have some income that we need for English language lessons: we provide a private teacher.

"We have a concert in January - the McSmiths of which I am a member. That is at St Teresa's hall in Sidmouth. We also have the Advent fair next week at the Catholic church where the proceeds are going to Sidmouth Companions."

Howard James:

"There may be people out there listening to you at the moment saying yes Brigid, you are doing a wonderful job and you are helping people, but they might be thinking charity begins at home."

Brigid McSmith:

"I would say that it is never either or: it has to be both. We are called to love everyone - our neighbour. Our neighbour may be the person next door. It may be someone in this country. I think it is also anywhere in the world. We are given wonderful opportunities in life. If we become passionate about something, I really think that's where we can help. With Community Sponsorship we are helping people in most need. Many people in Community Sponsorship Groups are also helping locally. We don't not want to help

people in our communities and in our own country. We do both. We do the best we can with what we've got. I would encourage everyone to do that."

Howard James:

"Are you in need of people to come and help you?"

Brigid McSmith:

"No - after we did our academic exercise if you like the next step - was we know the services are there but how are the family going to access them - who is going to help We had an open meeting in Sidmouth. 50 people turned up - most of the people I didn't know. On the day 40 people said yes, we are seriously interested. 30 went on to do the training and the the DBS checks. And then Covid hit and so for a year, we had to change the way we were going to deliver support - very IT based initially. We started with 25 - 26 helpers and we have retained 23 volunteers. We have had two leads in every area of support. They've stayed with us. It's been remarkable. They have been amazing."

Howard James:

"Where do you go from here now? What happens next?
The Syrians and other such people. Where do you need to go?"

Brigid McSmith:

"The whole of Sidmouth - they are such gracious people. They are so generous, they are so hospitable. They have really embraced the community and the community has embraced them. They are very much part of us. As a Community Sponsorship Group we will disband. We will want to promote other Community Sponsorship Groups. It's a wonderful thing for a community. You gain invaluable. These families are a blessing to the community and if anyone is inspired or feels passionate about helping, this is a real tangible way to be able to help those in most need.:

Howard James:

"If anyone wants to help give us some contact details."

Brigid McSmith:

"www.sidmouthcompanions.co.uk - if anyone who wanted to get in touch with us, there is an email address on there If you are interested in joining a group in Devon or someone else might be listening from a different area or starting one yourself.
www.resetuk.org Go onto their website - you will get a really good picture of Community Sponsorship."

The full interview is available to listen on the link below from 23 minutes into the programme and finishes at 35.44

<https://player.autopod.xyz/249776>

