

Assisting Refugees in accessing Digital Services

Why do refugees need access to digital services?

As part of your Community Sponsorship Application, the Home Office will ask you how you will empower the family you support to access 'Digital services'. This refers to how you will help refugees get on-line for a wide variety of reasons including claiming benefits, accessing information, accessing online banking (if used), for students in the family to study and most importantly, communicating with others; whether this is family at home, or in host countries as well as others in the UK. Having access to digital services can make a huge difference to a person's quality of life – and this can be especially true for people like refugees who find themselves far away from family and friends!

Deciding which services to provide

Community Sponsorship Groups have – as ever – addressed providing this service in a variety of ways, and you must ensure you are comfortable with the best way forward. It's natural if your Group members want to provide the family with easy access to the best digital services available for as long as possible, however, this may not be the best way to empower the refugees you support, and making long term decisions before the family arrives and you get to know them may mean that you are tied into a contract for internet access that is not required. Moreover, if the family is left out of decision-making and is likely to feel unprepared to pay for or access digital services independently when your Group steps back from supporting them.

Nevertheless, for the first few weeks or months after the family arrives, it is likely that they will depend upon your Group to help them access the internet and set up phone services. They won't have a UK bank account or an income when they first arrive, so it will take a bit of time before they will be able to set up or pay for any contracts themselves.

Your Group might therefore find it helpful to think of your role as having **two stages**: an early stage in which you're likely to be directly providing or helping the refugees to access certain services, and a later stage in which you're working with the family to access these services without your assistance.

Stage 1: Meeting the immediate needs of the family

Think about what services the family will need in the **immediate period** (i.e. the first few weeks or months) after their arrival in the UK, e.g. internet access, a SIM card and data plan. They will need to apply for benefits, open a bank account and register in schools and with GPs.

In order to ensure that the family has reliable ways to access and set up these services, you might consider using your funds to pay for two months of internet access, providing a tablet or computer and providing an unlocked SIM card that is already topped up with data as soon as they arrive. Groups have shared with us that most adult refugees arrive with a smart phone; so providing an unlocked SIM card with prepaid credit is suitable – remember that you won’t know what resources the family you are supporting have until they arrive. Some Groups who have not provided an internet connection in the accommodation have found that their local libraries provide free internet access. In encouraging the resettled family to access the internet this way, they have found it is an excellent opportunity for them to meet others and become acquainted with the wider local community.

You may need to provide support in how to use websites, set up email accounts and access the DWP website (remember that the Job Centre can provide internet access to benefits claimants).

We’ve provided a table that might help your Group to decide what services to provide, when and for how long:

Service	Initial cost of provision	Continuing cost of provision (e.g. cost per month)	Length of time to provide this service.	Do we want to provide this?
Broadband subscription				
Mobile phone and/or unlocked SIM card				
TV license				
Tablet/computer*				

*We know that lots of Groups can provide a laptop or tablet for the family when they arrive. Remember that if you are doing this, you can explore ways of buying devices second hand, or even encouraging people or businesses in your local community to donate old devices to your Group. If you decide to provide a computer for the family, remember that you can use this [to access MOVEit](#) once the family is allocated to your Group.

We would encourage you, that should you decide to provide a device, you make it clear to the family you are supporting that this is a donation, and does not mean that you will necessarily replace or repair this should this get damaged.

Stage 2: Empowering the family

From the very beginning, explain to the family the support you are providing and for how long. If you are providing a broadband connection for two months, make it's clear when this will end and you will help them to decide if they are willing/able to take responsibility for the costs, or discontinue the service.

Once the family have had time to settle into their home and start their life in the UK, you can begin to work with them to access the services that best suits their needs.

You'll need to think about how to explain their options to them and whether you'll need an interpreter to do this. This will mean that you'll need to research the different options available to the family in terms of contract types and providers. Make sure you give the family time to make their decision about what they would like to do.

You'll also need to help the family to think about what is feasible within their income. As part of the research for your application, you may have researched free or subsidised services in your local area, e.g. many libraries provide free or cheap internet access to local residents, and many schools now offer homework clubs where students can use the internet to complete their schoolwork. You can revisit these options with the family, explaining what is available in your neighbourhood. In the end, it isn't your role to tell the family how to spend their money, but it is the role of your Group to help them understand how to live independently within their means.