



The Role of Social Connections, Time and Place in Refugees' Pathways to Inclusion

Final Report 2020-2023 Executive Summary

The AMIF ABM₃ New Scots: A Pathway to Social and Economic Inclusion Project is a partnership between researchers from Queen Margaret University's Institute for Global Health and Development and three organisations who deliver specialist services to refugees in Scotland: Scottish Refugee Council, Workers Educational Association, and Bridges Programmes. The research component of the project has been conducted and delivered in three phases from October 2020 until December 2023.

The research has explored the following research questions:

- What is the role of social connections in refugees' pathways to social and economic inclusion?
- What meaning(s) do refugees ascribe to connections at different stages in these pathways?

The third and final phase of the research was conducted in 2023. Building on our learning over the first two phases of the project (see [Baillot](#)

[et al., 2022](#); [Vidal and Palombo, 2022](#)), and to support our partners to adapt to the needs of their growing and changing client group, in the third phase we have focused on the role of time and place in building social connections towards economic and social inclusion. The research objectives for the project extension period were therefore to:

- Explore how time and place impact the social connections that support specific means and markers of integration, including housing and employability;
- Analyse the role of place in facilitating social connections between more recently arrived refugee people and more established residents in Scottish Local Authority (LA) areas; and
- Discuss the contribution of AMIF partners to participants' integration journeys.

The research has employed a mixed-methods methodology, including visual mapping workshops and interviews to engage with resettled and recently recognised refugees and practitioners;

participatory stalls in two locations engaging New Scots and long-term residents and the use of a multi-method Social Connections Mapping Tool.

Key findings

The role of the Integration Service

The many people who had a deeply felt connection to one or more elements of the integration service described the practical and emotional ways that receiving this service had played a part in their pathways so far. The Integration Service can be an exemplar of positive social connection, with the following functions and meaning/values ascribed:

Functional roles

Providing a route map to navigate complex systems: especially at points of transition. Practitioners reflected that this role is increasingly important, but ever more difficult to provide because of constant changes in the UK legislative and policy context.

Recognising people's agency and skills: participants spoke of the positive impact the service had had in helping them to recognise and validate their existing skills, in the context of employability, English language or other domains.

Challenging systems barriers: helping people challenge specific barriers or constraints including failures to meet statutory duties related to social housing. Consistent system failures make it difficult for practitioners to focus on people's longer-term aspirations.

Connecting to other people and places: either informally or through formal referrals. The Integration Service is critical but cannot operate in isolation and works best when it acts as a node in a wider support network of diverse connections fulfilling varying functions and meanings.

Meaning and values

Care: The experience of care in a connection gave people the confidence to navigate new systems occasioned by changing immigration statuses and family circumstances.

Trust: Having a trusted connection with whom to sense-check the information they found helped people to move forward with their plans, even if they had the skills to research opportunities independently.

Reciprocity: For some people, transactional contact with the Integration Service suffices, but others spoke positively of being able to 'give back', for example by becoming volunteers within Integration Service partners or by setting up their own community groups.

Consistency: Personal (not solely by phone or email) and consistent points of contact within organisations were vital to enabling the flow of resources and sense of care and connection.

Time

We identified three key transition stages for refugees which mark a shift in priorities and a changing of support needs in negotiating pathways towards social and economic inclusion.

Stage one: 'getting in': Begins from day one of arriving in Scotland when people are orientating themselves. Through facing challenges around emergency or temporary housing, for example, people deal with instability and uncertainty, regardless of route taken to the country. However, important long-term connections can be still built during this stage which help people progress with their goals.

Stage two: 'getting by': For several participants who were asylum route refugees, the connections they had made through volunteering or studying

while waiting on their application decision led them directly to job opportunities following a positive asylum decision. For resettled refugees, who arrive in Scotland with leave to remain, this stage is marked less by a formal change in immigration status and more by moves towards increased independence and stability. However, various challenges such as housing instability, lack of career recognition in the UK, and examples of racist abuse meant that many people remained to some extent in the first stage of 'getting in'.

Stage three: Negotiating a path 'through': This transition point is more subtle. For most people, it could be said to begin when they are in more settled housing and more able to look towards the future and their longer-term aspirations for themselves and their families. Others were finding they were not able to progress their aspirations at all or indeed were experiencing ruptures which set them back to a stage of trying to get by or even get in.

These settlement stages do not necessarily progress in a positive and linear fashion. People can feel they are achieving their aspirations in one area of life, while feeling they are unable to progress in other areas. Progress made at one point can be reversed if people experience discrimination or abuse at a later date; or if their mental or physical health declines, for example.

Place

Our research has highlighted that wherever people are housed, a well-resourced physical and social infrastructure is vital to enable them to connect and to thrive. The existence and accessibility of certain social infrastructure in urban landscapes impacted quite clearly on the building of individual connections such as friendships. Activist networks, community centres and schools of their children were critical to participants in terms of pursuing shared interests,

forging friendships, sharing diverse cultures and exchanging useful information.

Our findings relating more to the physical realities of certain localities helped reaffirm that even the most constructive connections can't overcome a combination of structural inequalities existing locally, which may include lack of social housing investment, a stagnating economy and systemic experiences of antisocial behaviour. Discussions with non-refugee participants also highlight the shared experience of these barriers between residents of different backgrounds, and the value of joined-up and place-based policy interventions that invest in physical and social infrastructure to improve social outcomes including integration.

Key Recommendations

For all:

- Within the sphere of their responsibilities recognise, invest and sustain safe and inclusive services and community venues, especially in areas with comparatively little experience of hosting refugee people.
- Develop interventions – in policy development, practice and service delivery - that value social connections and recognise their impact across every domain of integration.

Future integration services should:

- Continue to coordinate, share and develop good practice between third sector, private and statutory networks across Scotland.

COSLA, local authorities, statutory services:

- Continue to draw from learning from civil society partners to shape and influence future policy and practice as regards the settlement of New Scots, particularly in areas outside the Central Belt.

The Scottish Government should:

- Ringfence funding for Integration Services.

- Support local authorities to invest in social housing stock, recognising the fundamental need for this to create the stability and safety required for integration.

The UK Government should:

- Recognise the negative impact of housing instability on all aspects of integration and seek to address systems that undermine people’s access to appropriate sustainable housing, especially at key transition points.

Future research should:

- Further develop research methods that engage all residents in integration research and promote community cohesion.

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The full report can be found here: miscintegrationresearch.org/publications

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Our Partners:



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