



Queen Margaret University
INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL HEALTH
AND DEVELOPMENT

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

Final Report

2020 - 2023

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1. Introduction

This report outlines overall findings from the **ABM₃ New Scots: Pathways to Social and Economic Inclusion Project** which was funded by the Asylum Migration Integration Fund (AMIF) and delivered in three phases from October 2020 until December 2023. Here we focus on the third and final phase of the research conducted in 2023 while drawing on learning from Phase One (see [Baillot et al., 2022](#)) and from Phase Two ([Vidal and Palombo, 2022](#)). More in-depth information is also available in our academic publications (see [Käkelä et al., 2023](#); [Vera Espinoza et al., 2023](#)) and [our interim reports](#). The three phases of the project and their respective aims are represented in the Timeline at figure 1.

The ABM₃ New Scots: Pathways to Social and Economic Inclusion Project is a partnership between researchers based at Queen Margaret University's Institute for Global Health and Development and three third sector organisations who deliver specialist services: Scottish Refugee Council (integration planning), Workers' Educational Association (English language assessment and learning) and Bridges Programmes (employability support). These practice partners have engaged with the research team to facilitate data collection, interpret findings and share mutual learning. The research component of the ABM₃ project has explored the following research questions:

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

Building on our learning over the first two phases of the project, and to support our partners to adapt to the needs of their growing and changing client group,¹ in the third phase we have focused

in on the role of time and place in building social connections towards economic and social inclusion. The research team's 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.

Names used in this report are all pseudonyms, to protect the identity and confidentiality of our participants.

This report is not an evaluation of any one service, intervention, or locality. Rather, the findings and recommendations are based on the situated perceptions of people who took part in the research activities conducted in this phase of our study. We hope that the findings from this small-scale study can be used to inform further research and future service provision.

2. Methodology

Research activities and outputs of the AMIF ABM₃ project from its inception in October 2020 to completion in December 2023 are represented in figure 3 and are detailed in our previous reports. In this section we focus on the methods and activities conducted during the third phase of the research project, which was delivered through three related work packages, outlined below:

Work Package 1| Social connections and time:

The research team conducted individual interviews using visual tools with 24 AMIF beneficiaries who had been referred to AMIF-

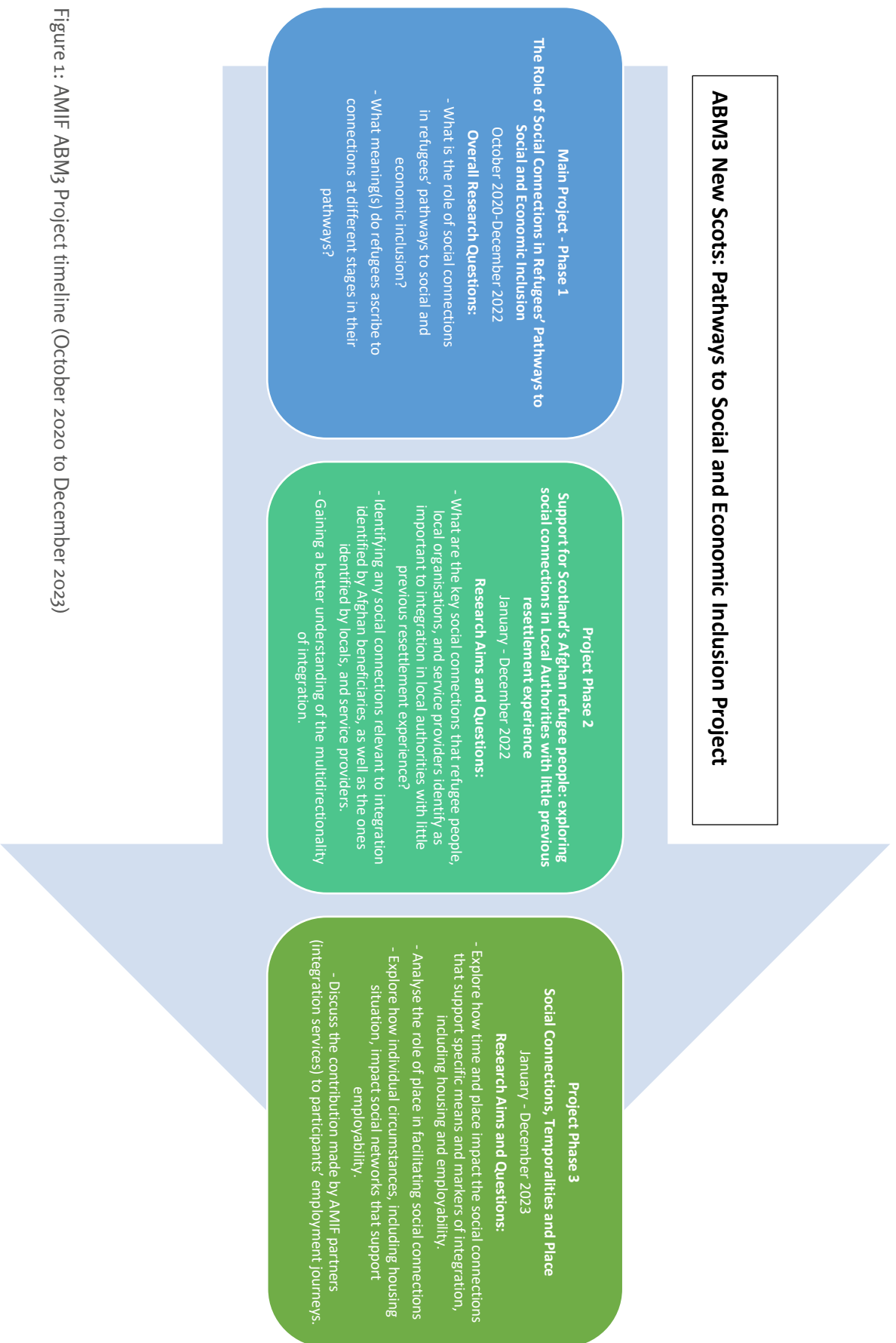


Figure 1: AMIF ABM3 Project timeline (October 2020 to December 2023)

funded employability services at SRC or Bridges Programmes between January 2021 and May 2023. The sample was selected to include asylum route refugees, Ukrainian displaced people and resettled Afghans. The first round of interviews was conducted in May-June 2023 and reported in [Interim Report 8](#). We interviewed 12 of the same people a second time in October-November 2023. 13 of these interview participants also completed an online social connections employability survey, although facing similar challenges as in previous phases of the project (as discussed in our 2022 report).

Work Package 2 | Understanding the role of place in social connections: This work package explored how the area where people were housed impacted on their social connections and identified the spaces or places that facilitated their interactions. In consultation with our practice partners, we selected two localities for comparison. The first was the Glasgow neighbourhood of Maryhill. Glasgow is Scotland's longest established asylum dispersal area, and Maryhill is the area where largest single proportion of people using the service were recorded as living. The second area was the city of Dundee where a relatively significant number of resettled refugees live and where the Scottish Refugee Council has well-developed service provision.



Figure 2: The research team conducting research using stalls in Dundee

Work Package 3 | Sharing learning and supporting practice: We developed and delivered four learning events in this phase of the research: two learning events for practitioners; one learning event for research participants; and one public facing event open to partners and wider stakeholders. In doing so, we built an iterative cycle of reflection and action to support policy and practice development.

3. Starting Points - Existing Learning

Researchers and practitioners recognise that building social relationships is critical to processes of integration (Kerlaff, 2023; Baillot, 2023; Vera-Espinoza et al, 2023; Strang & Quinn, 2021). The AMIF-funded Integration Service has built its interventions around the Indicators of Integration Framework (Ndofo-Tah et al, 2019; Ager & Strang, 2008). The framework uses the categories of bonds, bridges and links to distinguish between different types of connections. Bonds are defined as being relationships characterised by high levels of trust and most often with people like you, bridges tend to be weaker ties with people who are different from you in some way and links are with organisations of the state.

The Indicators of Integration Framework recognises that connections can shift and change, both in terms of whom refugees choose (or do not choose) to connect with, to what purpose, and how they experience the relationship. While this framework continues to inform our work, categorising connections as being either bonds, bridges or links risks failing to recognise this fluidity and the resulting overlaps between categories (Baillot et al., 2022). We have chosen therefore to examine social connections through a different lens – form (who is connecting), function (what were the results of these connections) and meaning (what did connections mean to refugees). This focus on function and meaning, rather than outcomes, recognises that the relevance of

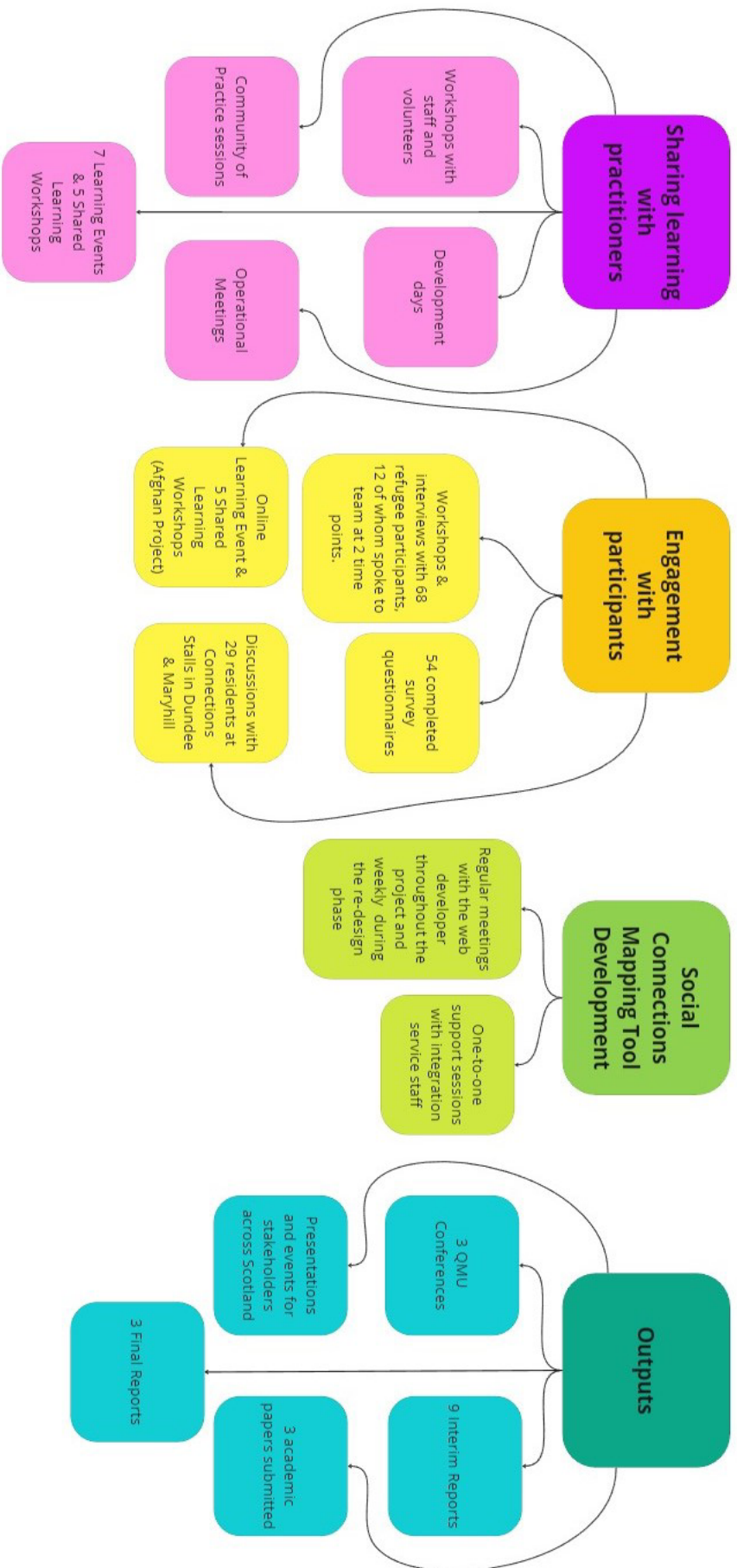


Figure 3: Map showing summary of activities and outputs

tangible outcomes including employment and housing varies from person to person and changes over time.

Phase One Learning

A central message from our research is that people valued quality over quantity in the social connections they made. The strongest trusting relationships were with people and organisations who demonstrated care and consistency, going beyond a transactional encounter.

Form

Three connections were identified as being most important to people's lives in Scotland. The first were third sector refugee-supporting organisations, including but not limited to the Integration Service partners.² Faith groups, both for worship and for practical assistance, were also seen as fundamental. Individual connections with friends, neighbours and family constituted informal relationships that harness power within communities and can help open doors. However, several participants highlighted that they primarily relied on themselves to progress. For some people, this reflected their personal values, for others, it was borne out of experience that they could not rely on others.

Several factors influence how people make and sustain connections. For parents of different genders, but more so for women, family life and caring commitments could restrict their time and opportunities for building connections outside of the home. However, children and family could offer avenues for connection, through shared spaces like hobby groups and school. Being unable to speak English was of course a major barrier to making social connections, and shared language was a facilitator. While employment was an important aspiration for everyone we spoke to, participants noted that being in work can negatively impact upon social connections as little free time is left to form and maintain relationships.

Function and Meaning

Trusted social connections put information in people's hands. Refugee supporting organisations and individuals from a refugee background who had been in the country longer were able to provide the 'route map', to help understand and navigate unfamiliar systems in the UK. Exchanges of care were important too. The sense of being able to rely on and feel valued by a service provider or organisation, led to people feeling more supported and seen in respect to their personal aspirations. It also strengthened participants' confidence and ability to self-advocate.

The positive effect of such trusting and long-lasting connections was reflected in the recommendation that building social connections is embedded into service provision and not viewed independently from markers of integration. For example, when exploring a person's pathway to finding suitable housing, we suggest that service providers open a conversation around not only who people are connected to and where there are gaps in their support networks, but also how these interactions are experienced.

Phase Two Learning

One prominent theme from our research with people arriving via the Afghan Resettlement Scheme was the effects of living in hotel accommodation.³ Participants emphasised that living in temporary and/or congregate accommodation can hinder integration, for reasons such as:

- A pervasive feeling of waiting and being in limbo.
- Insecure housing status making it more difficult to find work.
- An isolating effect making it more difficult to integrate into communities.
- Slowing the progress of English learning.

- General distress and ill effects on mental wellbeing

Some people did share more positive experiences in this type of accommodation, as living in proximity with people with common backgrounds or shared experiences of displacement made it easy to make friends and for peer support networks to grow. This experience was echoed by some resettled Ukrainians in phase 3 of our research, and by some people in shared asylum accommodation. For resettled Afghans, peer networks filled essential gaps in the provision of support. This was important for people living in areas where the relevant Scottish local authorities were sometimes struggling to provide appropriate services, given their relatively recent experience of housing refugees.

4. Findings

These findings from the extension period (Phase 3) summarise learning from the research component of the ABM₃ Project (2020-2023), with a focus on new data gathered during the extension period. The findings are structured under three headings: 4.1.) the role of the integration service; 4.2.) the impact of time; and 4.3.) the importance of place.

4.1. The role of the Integration Service

This section focuses on participants' views and experiences of integration service. Some participants did explain that the integration service had not always fully met their needs. It is important to note too that the integration service does not stand alone but is one element in a much wider network of people and organisations supporting integration in Scotland.

everything is important [...] The first thing Simon Community that I worked as a volunteer, if I didn't work as a volunteer I couldn't find this job I have now. If I couldn't contact the Clyde College I didn't know Lisa and Pauline and there

was no one recommend me to contact with the Bridges Programme. If I didn't [do the] interview with the Home Office I couldn't find Amina and Saheliya [...] If I didn't get refugee status I couldn't know the Scottish Refugee Council, you know [through] Scottish Refugee Council, I know [name of housing caseworker]. Everything is like a chain...

(Ana, Glasgow)

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. For that reason, we use the Integration Service as an exemplar for what a productive, positive social connection can look like. This encompasses functional roles and the value and meaning these provoked, as represented in blue and green respectively in figure 4.

Functional roles

Providing a route map to navigate complex systems: this was particularly important at points of transition (see section 4.ii. on the role of time). Practitioners in learning events reflected that this role is increasingly important, but ever more difficult to provide because of constant changes in the UK legislative and policy context.⁴

Recognising people's agency and skills: in previous Interim Reports 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. This was closely linked to the service's role in helping people rebuild their confidence, professionally and personally, after the loss of agency experienced during migration and the asylum process.

Challenging systems barriers: participants shared examples of instances when someone from the service had assisted them to overcome specific barriers or constraints. This assistance ranged

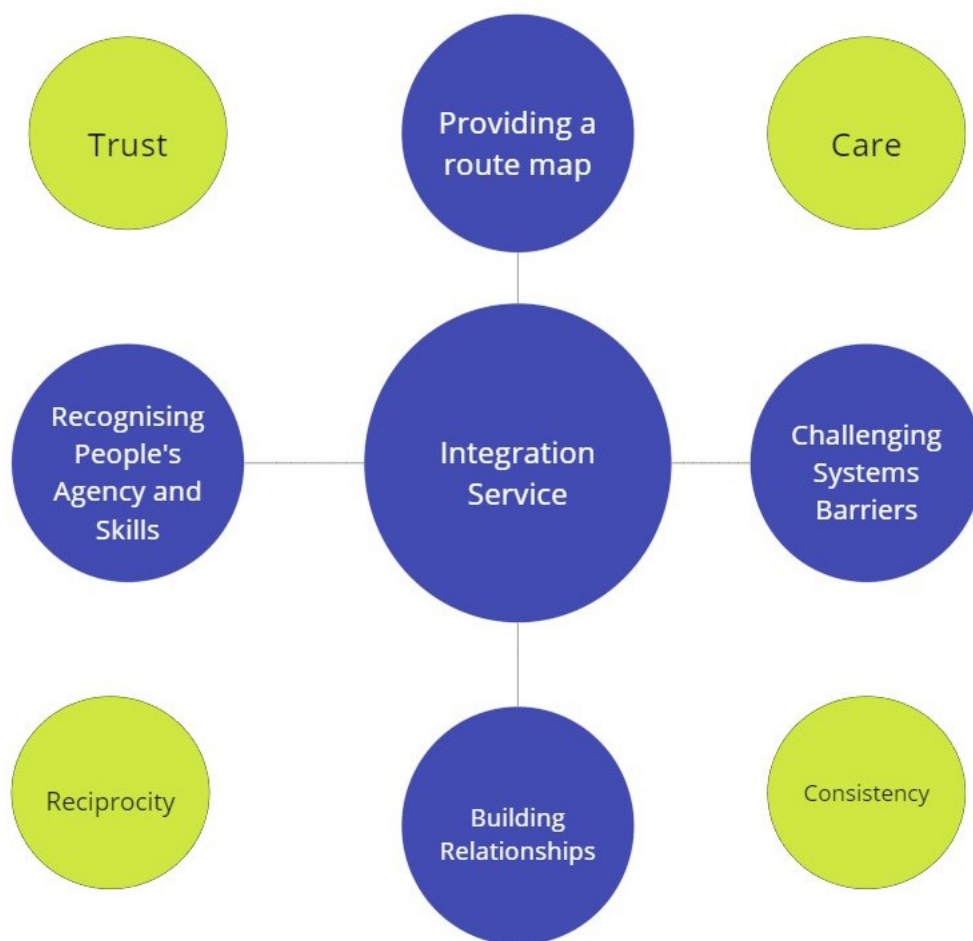


Figure 4: The integration service as a positive social connection: functions & values

from providing support to gain recognition of their skills and qualifications in the UK, to challenging failures to meet statutory duties as regard access to social housing. Practitioners expressed frustration that much of their time was spent resolving systems barriers, meaning that it was sometimes difficult to focus on people's longer-term aspirations.

Connecting to other people and places:

Participants highlighted the integration service's ability to connect people with others – either informally or through formal referrals. Effective signposting only works if there are services available that will accept referrals and are

responsive when contacted. The Integration Service is critical but cannot operate in isolation and works best when it acts as a node in a wider support network. This depends on a variety of local contextual factors including, not least the support infrastructure of where they are housed and how safe and inclusive the area feels. The importance of taking a place-based approach to integration is discussed further in section 4.3. on Place.

Meaning and values

While these varied between participants, four core values and meanings emerged as important to facilitating the flow of resources between

participants and the people and organisations with whom they connect.

Care: where people felt that individuals and – by extension – organisations cared about them, the connection was experienced more positively. Numerous examples of feeling cared for by integration service staff were given. Experiencing care in this way gave people the confidence to navigate new systems occasioned by changing immigration statuses and family circumstances.

Trust: people were often fully able to search out information and opportunities for themselves, using methods common to the whole population – for example, Google or job search websites. However, having a trusted connection with whom to sense-check the information they found helped people to move forward with their plans.

Reciprocity: for some people, contact with the integration service did remain more transactional – they accessed it for support when needed and did not then have an opportunity or desire to return this in terms of time or skills. But others spoke positively of being able to ‘give back’, for example by becoming volunteers within Integration Service partners. Some participants had set up their own community groups or social enterprises to help other people seeking asylum and wider communities.

Consistency: Some people had only had contact with the service by phone or email, and in general this appeared to be less effective way to build a positive connection. Personal, consistent points of contact within organisations were vital to enabling the flow of resources and sense of care and connection.

While this section has focused on the Integration Service, we suggest that a combination of these roles and values underpin any connections that play important roles in people’s pathways to inclusion.

4.2. Time

From our research over the whole length of the project, we can broadly identify three key transition stages which mark a shift in priorities and a changing of support needs in negotiating pathways towards social and economic inclusion. These stages can be summarised as follows.

First stage: begins from day one of arriving in Scotland when people are orientating themselves. For people who have arrived through the asylum route this is an insecure time of living in a series of emergency and temporary housing arrangements while navigating the asylum process. For people arriving through the resettlement route, although they have relatively secure status from day one there are a number of factors that can create a sense of instability and uncertainty as we explore below.

Second stage: this comes, for asylum route refugees, after they receive status and are served ‘notice to quit’ in their asylum accommodation. For resettled refugees, it comes once they are moved on from their initial accommodation and into more settled accommodation. For many who have come through the Afghan and Ukrainian resettlement schemes, this also represents a transition from congregate living arrangements to being housed within a community setting.

Third stage: this transition point is more subtle and is less of a ‘starting again’ or ‘getting in’ and more of a ‘getting through’. 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. This stage is nonetheless where embedded poverty and particular exclusions woven into the process for housing asylum seekers and refugees, and in recognising their qualifications or navigating employment systems can come to the fore. We highlight the agency and resilience of our

interviewees in negotiating a way 'through' these challenges.

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 – as one participant explained – their mental or physical health declines. With this in mind, we reflect on what our participants told us about each of these stages, with a focus on the people and places that played an important role as they worked towards their aspirations, particularly with regards to housing and employment. In doing so, we highlight learning from positive stories as well as highlighting structural barriers and other factors that created ruptures in other people's experiences. As ever, the most important people and places at every stage tend to be those who not only perform a useful function, but those who play their role in a way that demonstrates care.

Stage one: 'getting in'

Our participants confirmed that integration begins from day one of arrival in a new area or country. People and organisations who offered useful information on rights and entitlements in this early settlement stage included Integration Service partners and other, longer-established refugees. Community organisations such as Maryhill Integration Network also played this role. They additionally provided opportunities to meet other people, and – for asylum route refugees in particular – activities that offered distraction while waiting for an immigration decision.

Many participants lived in temporary accommodation during the early days of their time in Scotland. As outlined in the Afghan Report, this can create barriers to many integration domains. However, in terms of social connections,

communal living did offer some participants a fruitful space where positive connections could be made. Many participants made friendships in their initial accommodation with people who were in a similar situation: either seeking asylum, recently arrived through a resettlement scheme, or, as in Silvan's case, fellow students. Longevity of connections was important. Many people highlighted the importance of connections who provided consistent and sustained support in 'showing the way', whether that be a friend who has been in the country longer, or a named individual in an organisation who provided information as well as other practical and emotional support.

I would say because each one of them came in like separate times, but I would say the most at the beginning was the friends I made in the accommodation and the church that I used to go [...] Those two you consider them family now, because they helped me, they stayed with me when I needed them and every week I know I'm going to meet them.
(Silvan)

Volunteering also came up as an important route for many participants to building social networks, keeping busy and gaining experience. This was important at this stage of settlement when some were not legally able to work, were looking for work or did not feel they could look for employment until they were in more permanent accommodation.

Stage two: 'getting by'

For asylum route refugees, being recognised as a refugee and granted leave to remain was a key transition point in people's lives (Strang, Baillot & Mignard, 2018). While it was a watershed moment that signified 'a new start', the following stage of navigating mainstream welfare and housing systems and negotiating a pathway to employment - whether that be through trying to pick up an

were offered paid work by their managers as soon as they were granted leave to remain. However, others found that their efforts to build their skills, experience and networks did not translate into job opportunities at all, or not in their skill area (see [Interim Report 8](#)). This was the case for both Caroline and Hena. Both were women aged between 45 and 54, who were juggling child caring responsibilities with attempts to regain work in highly skilled fields. Both spoke of feeling stuck and never managing to move beyond studying or volunteering into paid roles commensurate with their skills and experience. For Caroline (see figure 5), this feeling of being unable to move forward had led her, by the time of her second interview, to change career path entirely – from medicine to catering.

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. Housing was critical to people feeling they were moving forward. Even when confident in other areas of life, living in temporary accommodation, including but not limited to hotels or cruise ships, meant that people remained to some extent in the first stage of 'getting in'. This feeling of being unable to move forward was reiterated by Dundee workshop participants who explained that at this stage in their pathways, they craved connections who would help with specific advice on employability that would move beyond more general CV-building:

Obviously we need references. We need someone to support us within their connections. [...] Instead of helping us with applying for the jobs they should advise them that we do have someone who is capable of doing this. Who is capable of working in accounts, finance, admin or HR, operations and logistics. Hire him as a trainee and offer him as a job. Hire him as a trainee, give him a chance.
(Khalil)

Some workshop participants had experienced racist abuse, both physical and verbal. They described this as compounding employment-related frustrations. This stage of 'getting by' then can feel like a place of struggle for many and it is striking the difference between productive connections who can act as a catalyst to unlock opportunities where other negative encounters can contribute further to a feeling of struggle and isolation. Despite this, many people were very positive about their lives and deployed various strategies to negotiate these barriers and begin to 'get through'.

Stage three: Negotiating a path through

We were able to interview 12 of the 24 participants interviewed between May and June 2023 (see [Interim Report 8](#)) a second time 5-6 months later to check whether anything had changed in their lives and in progressing their individual and familial integration journeys. For some, there had been major life transitions such as having a new baby, starting a new business or a degree. For the majority the changes in their lives were more subtle in this relatively short period and related more to their shifting aspirations and priorities for their own pathways. Some people who were in employment or studying were questioning where next in their career trajectory and were looking strategically at who could help them to achieve the next step in achieving their new, 'bigger and better ambitions' (Amir). 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. Rather than experiencing a linear progression of aspirations over time, the integration journey is more akin to a snakes and ladders board, with many people constantly moving between these stages of getting in, getting on and getting through, often simultaneously.

For David, an absence of positive connections halted his progression in employment. At the

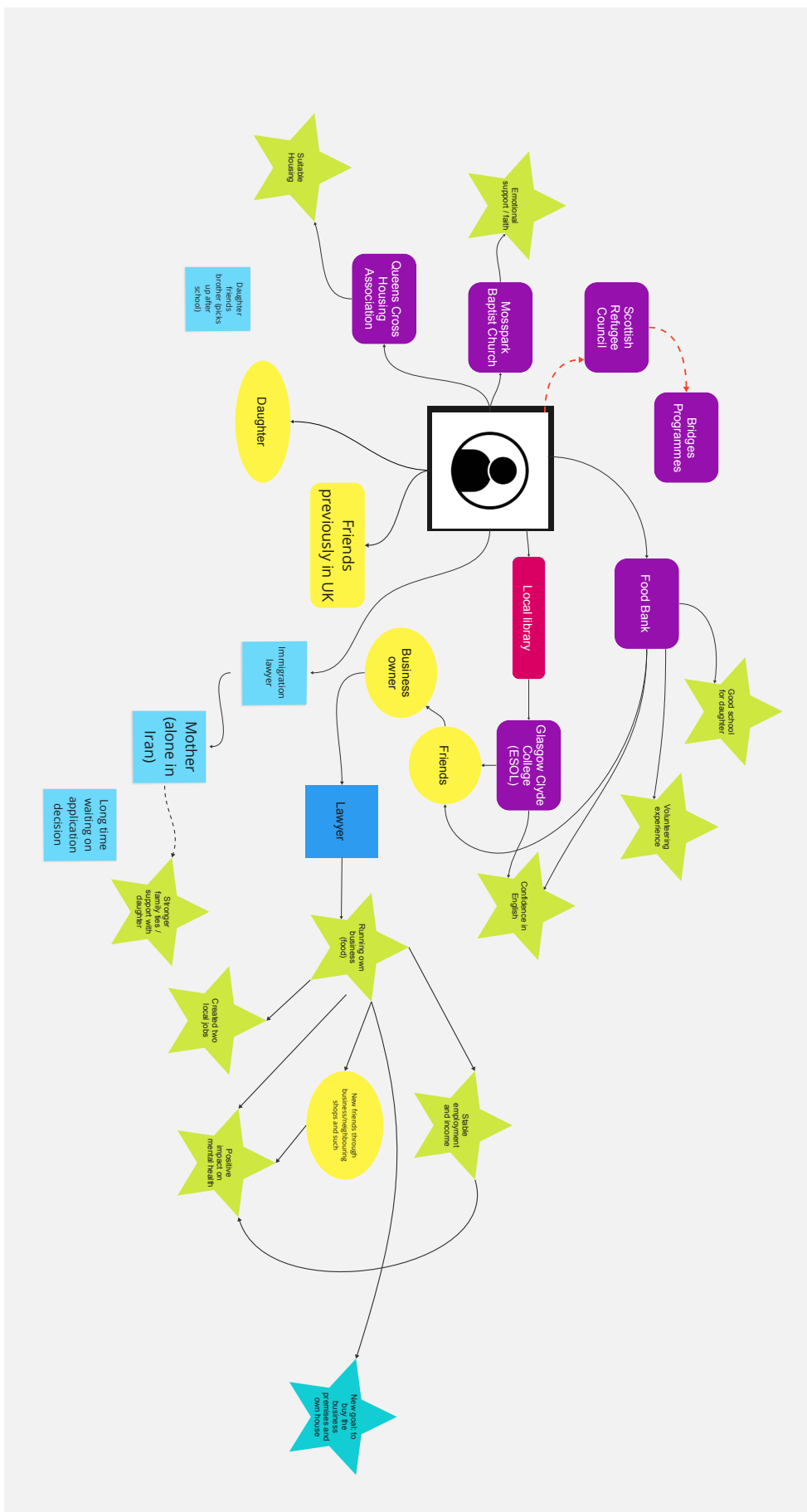


Figure 6: Amir's pathway map from second interview

time of our first interview, he explained that the pastor at his local church had advocated on his behalf to the local MP and this led to his being able to secure permanent accommodation in his chosen local area. He had gone on to find full-time employment, his children were settled in school and he was expecting another child. However, five months later, he explained that he felt stuck in a job where he experienced poor treatment and conditions. At this stage of his integration journey, he was questioning what 'normal' behaviour for an employer in the UK was, what his rights were and did not know who could support him to assert his rights as an employee. While in some senses he was 'getting through', in others he was just 'getting by' and was again experiencing a gap in his knowledge of UK systems or where to find support to navigate them, similar to when he had first arrived in the UK.

Some were clear that the most important connections were no longer those such as Project Partners and employability support organisations who could help map out the pathway to employment, or help them progress towards employment, but those who could actually support them to secure employment. Amir had explained in this first interview that he hoped to start his own business, and six months later this dream had become a reality. The key connections who had helped him to realise his ambition were people from his country whom he had met through college and who had been in Scotland for longer than him. His business offered not only a means to make a living, but was leading Amir to extend his social circle, with a variety of positive impacts:

I just wanted to say that because of the running of the business now I'm getting to meet more people and to make more friends. And also, with the neighbours who have shops next to mine I see people, I talk to them, we have a laugh together, and this has a positive impact on my mental health. So, the business has become a bigger circle than the college used to be.
(Amir)

But 'getting through' did not necessarily mean deepening existing connections. Lilya, for example arrived through the Ukraine Resettlement Scheme and had enjoyed a very rich and wide social network while temporarily housed on a cruise ship in Glasgow. She and her fellow Ukrainians were linked into a variety of organisations named individuals who organised the Ukrainian Hubs had acted as key nodes in a network that organised inter-cultural events and activities and linked her to volunteering opportunities. Once she moved to housing outside the city, she found it harder to commute into Glasgow to attend events and activities and it seemed she had less of an active social life than before. Similarly, gaining work or moving house could make it harder to attend events and activities run by organisations they had previously been closely connected to, and therefore to sustain the connection with the people they had met through them.

A further important goal that for some people was a crucial stage in settlement was family reunion; to bring over family members they had had to leave behind. For those like Aminy who had come ahead of their partner and children to claim asylum, the immediate concern had been to bring over his children and wife from Afghanistan. This signified another key transition point of 'starting again' and a point when, for the third time, Aminy would need to move house.

Then in the middle of January 2021 I was granted and I started again for my family because I have two kids and my wife and they were waiting in Afghanistan. And then I started to apply for the family reunion application.
(Aminy)

For Amir and David who had their immediate families in Scotland with them and had achieved their goals of gaining employment, they were now turning their attention to bringing their mothers to join them in the country. This meant that they once again needed to engage with the

Home Office, Project Partners and potentially immigration lawyers, meaning that their network of connections shifted and changed (see figure 6).

The stage of 'getting through' then, is not at all straightforward but is part and parcel of the constant cycle of negotiating a winding and sometimes circuitous pathway towards greater social and economic inclusion. What is clear is that most of our participants were actively negotiating a way through the often limited 'opportunity structures' available to them; structures that limited their freedom to choose where they lived, and the careers they pursued. They employed many and various strategies to circumnavigate these structural barriers, including building supportive social networks and exercising agency in the choices available to them.

4.3. Place

When we refer to 'place', in the context given here, we refer to social infrastructure, arenas which facilitate different forms of interaction between people. We also refer to physical infrastructure, more broadly, in the context of how characteristics of local areas – such as neighbourhood or towns - influence integration. We explore each in turn, highlighting learning about the role that the inter-related concepts of social and physical infrastructure play in pathways to social and economic inclusion. We spoke to a small sample of refugees and other residents in Glasgow and Dundee to understand their situated perceptions of the areas where they live. These findings do not, therefore, purport to be generalisable to the whole population or definitive as to the characteristics of any specific city or area.

Social infrastructure: places that facilitate interaction with others

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.

I mean, at the beginning I didn't have a bank or anything so we had to go there in person so we got to know people there [Home Office provider]. And I found some good friends, very good friends that we are still friends together. Another important part was the church, they were very supportive, very, very much supportive, I cannot tell enough how supportive and lovely they were. I think for me they were like family, I was away from my family so I was alone here and they were really like my family.

(Yasmin)

Other important social infrastructure for building friendship included activist networks, where people pursued a shared advocacy project together; community centres, where participants highlighted positive experiences of participating in intercultural club or group activities and exchange; and schools of their children, where parents exchanged information and support.

Being able to visit and engage with activities in certain social infrastructures enabled not only deep friendships but sporadic positive connections, including with neighbours or even strangers. These led people living in Glasgow to frame the city as a welcoming or friendly place:

To be honest Glasgow is like a big village, you know, they are very supportive, they are very friendly, they are very nice.

(Paulo)

This was echoed in Maryhill in our activities with refugee and non-refugee people. Participants noted the role a dynamic and inclusive third sector network in Maryhill played in creating this, as well as referencing casual encounters with others such as neighbours. For one participant, Yasser,

who had moved from Maryhill across the city to a new home in Parkhead, there was a clear contrast between his experiences in the two areas:

Interviewer: Do you feel that that – you were saying everybody cares about themselves, do you feel that was the same in Maryhill as the new area?

Yasser: No... because I knew my neighbour here for example but there I feel a bit isolated.
(Yasser, Glasgow)

Conversely, a lack of social infrastructure where casual encounters could take place, or where it was possible to meet and get to know others in accessible and comfortable settings, were key concerns raised by participants in the second phase of our [research with resettled Afghans](#). Their experiences of staying for several months to a year in hotels in Edinburgh and Fife painted extreme examples of geographical and social isolation which contrasted strongly to findings from our work in Maryhill in this phase.

Despite living in accommodation located within communities, our Dundee refugee workshop participants also spoke of difficulties connecting with people outside their immediate family and friends from other refugee families. Indeed, one participant who had come to Scotland without any family members suggested he had no-one he could rely on. Some men associated their difficulties forming positive social connections to what they felt was a lack of social infrastructure, other than pubs.

... When I was in Iraq I worked as a bartender for four years. I used to drink and it was fine. I got here, tried the drinks but it was more like when you want to socialise you have to go to a pub, but I'm not like that. I got to a point where I got fed up of drinking, I just wanted to stop.
(Rami)

Our refugee participants in Dundee implied that

connections with people from other national backgrounds, including Scottish, would be valuable. Without exception, they appeared to be struggling with gaining meaningful employment or business opportunities. In no small part, the hope was that connections with longer-established residents might support them to progress their aspirations for economic and social inclusion.

Physical infrastructure: local environment

Broader considerations relating more to the physical realities of certain localities or cities were also at play in our exploration of the way place impacts social connections. Stall participants in Dundee uniformly expressed regret at the decline of investment in social and physical infrastructure over the years, and particularly in a lack of places to meet others. Many participants from both refugee and non-refugee backgrounds suggested that the lockdown restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic had had a major negative impact on the city's social, cultural and economic infrastructure. Engagement with wider stakeholders, which was outside the scope of this study, would be required to explore and contextualise these views.

While stall participants in Maryhill also spoke of physical changes – for the worse – and a sense that the area had declined, this was to some extent compensated for by the existence of community venues and shops were significant places that influenced their sense of attachment to Maryhill. These places were also the focus of our refugee participants in Maryhill.⁵ Refugee participants in Dundee spoke warmly more of outdoor spaces that provided opportunities for entertainment and connection with other resettled families. These included Camperdown Park, the Botanic Gardens and of Broughty Ferry. Physical landscape and access to nature were important resources that mitigated some other difficulties.

Several people who engaged with our workshops

and stalls in Dundee and Maryhill shared concerns about antisocial behaviour. Some linked these issues with broader concerns around the local economy and housing strategy. These common-strand issues influenced how safe and accepted refugee and non-refugee participants felt, and their overall perceptions of the area. Further research and engagement would be needed to highlight the scale and reasons for these perceived issues.

These observations recall Phillimore's (2021) point that even the most constructive connections can't overcome structural inequalities such as job market stagnation, poverty and embedded discrimination in an area. Nonetheless, this section indicates how specific interventions can facilitate, both in terms of social connections and in tackling key structural issues, greater outcomes in the face of common and unique challenges facing people integrating together in different areas of Scotland.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Over the last three years and building from the team's [previous and related studies](#), we have developed new understandings on the role and meaning of social connections. As previously discussed, we have focused on the *form, function and meaning* of social connections within refugees' pathways to social and economic inclusion. Working with our partners and using participatory mixed methods (see section 2), the research has engaged with people who have refugee status, but who have arrived in the UK through different routes, from different countries and at different times. Our findings have provided insights about the form of these connections (who is connecting), their function (what is their role) and meaning (how they are made sense of and what are the values associated to them), while also shedding light on how these are changed and/or are influenced by time and place (see figure 7).

Taken together, there are two contributions of this

work to be emphasised:

1. The form, function and meaning of social connections:

At the start of the report, we explored the form, function and meaning that participants in this study ascribed to the role of integration services, as social connections are embedded into service provision and cannot be viewed independently from markers of integration. However, this exploration contributes more widely to both the conceptual and empirical understanding of social connections. Our research has shown that:

i) The *form* is associated to a wide range of individuals and organisations who connect people to others, in relation to specific means and markers of integration. Our research has illustrated the relevance of service providers across the refugee third sector (particularly our project partners), the role of statutory services including GPs, schools, and solicitors, and a wide range of informal connections including friends, neighbours, work colleagues, classmates, or other people with a range of shared experiences including motherhood, ethnicity, nationality, hobbies and interests, entry route, and professional background. The form of the social connections people are able to make is context based and varies from place to place, being directly linked to the 'common interest infrastructures' available – or the lack thereof (Kerlaff and Käkelä, forthcoming). As we discussed in a previous report (Baillot et al., 2022) the research has also shown how in many cases it is not only a specific organisation that has been identified as a key connection, but more named people within that organisation who are pivotal. This emphasis on the personalised nature of deeply-felt connections demonstrates that while the form/function can be relevant, what is most important is the meaning associated to that relationship.

ii) The *function* is understood here as the

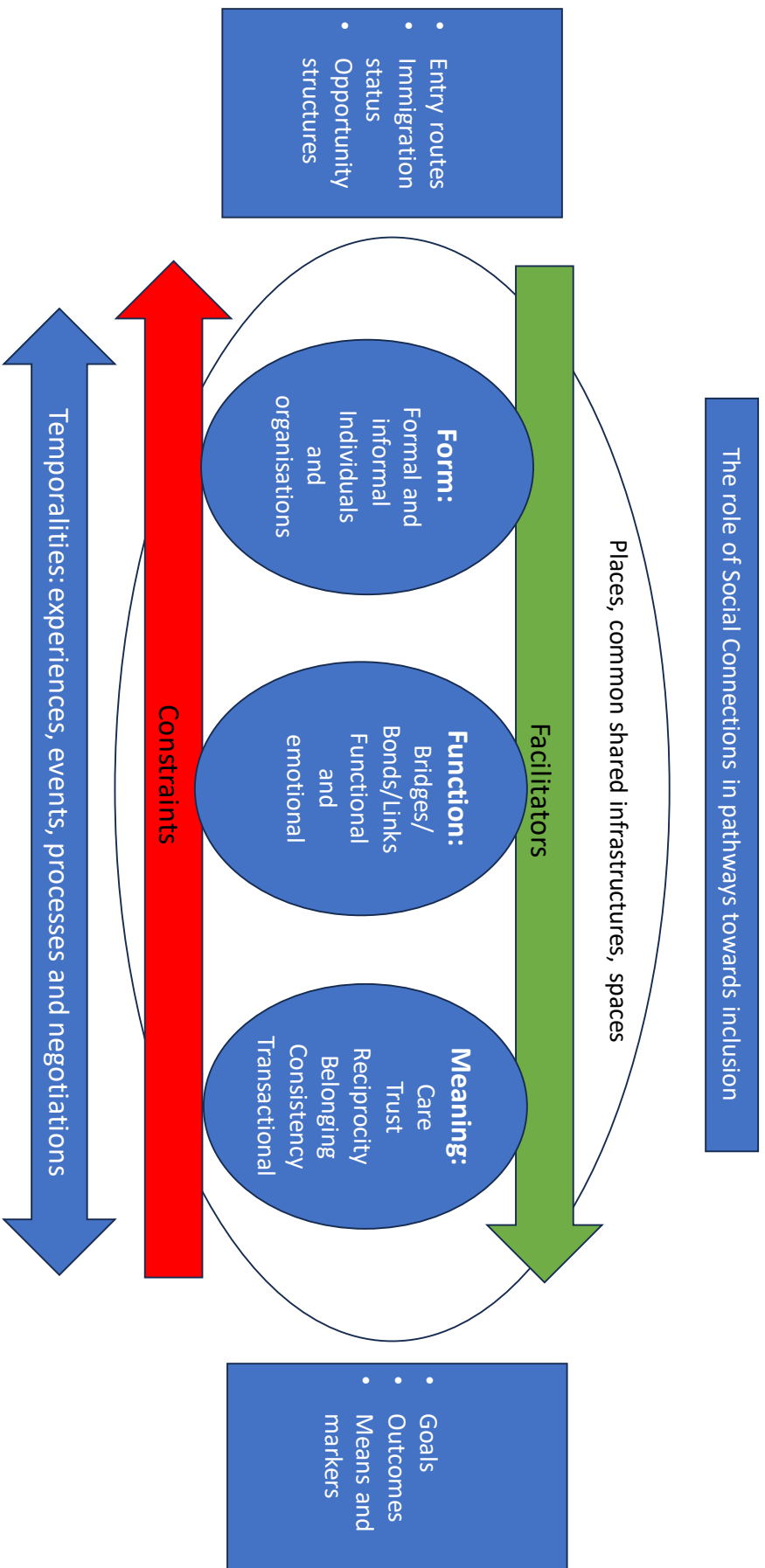


Figure 7: The role of social connections in pathways towards inclusion

role of social connections. It is more closely discussed in relation to signifiers associated to the categories of bridges/bonds/links (but focusing on the function alone). The focus is on what the social connections do, who and how they connect both within and between connectors and how they link to specific means and markers of integration. The latter is relevant to emphasise because even if social connectedness is relevant on its own as part of our social worlds, connections play a key facilitator role across all other domains associated to social and economic inclusion.

Throughout our research, participants have attributed both 'functional' and 'emotional' roles to these connections (see Baillot et al., 2022). They can be understood as providing specific information, services, resources, advocacy and opportunities or connect to others. At the same time, social connections can be linked to developing agency, providing emotional support and a sense of belonging. In many cases, the functional and the emotional roles are intertwined. The research also shows that while some connections are temporary and linked to their function at a specific point in time, others are sustained over longer time periods and move beyond the specific functionality they initially accomplished.

iii) The *meaning* ascribed to social connections is one of the most important contributions of this work. The meaning focuses on how people make sense of these connections and their function, as well as the values associated to them. This meaning is at the core of how these relationships are perceived to 'facilitate' or 'constrain' as part of their function, and how they are experienced. The focus on meaning also sheds light on the qualities associated with each connection and their function. Across the phases of the research, our analysis emphasises how social connections are made

sense of in relation to notions of care, trust (but also distrust), reciprocity and consistency. In many cases these are interlinked and are mostly associated with the sustainability of a relationship and/or a positive outcome. However, it is relevant to emphasise that some participants ascribed a purely transactional meaning to a connection. This means that they valued it only in so much as it played a functional role in helping them to achieve a measurable goal – for example, a housing officer who finds a home in a desired area, or a GP who refers on to an important form of treatment. At the same time, here we have focused on how people with a refugee background make sense of connections, which may be different to the meaning that the connector itself may ascribe to the relationship and its outcomes (see Käkälä et al., 2023).

2. Social connections across time and place:

In the last phase of the study, we have paid further attention to how these connections (and their associated functions, meanings and also outcomes) vary across time and place, impacting pathways towards inclusion. Our starting point – confirmed by the analysis of the data - was that integration is not linear, is multidirectional and embedded in place-based dynamics. By exploring the form, function and meaning of connections across different transition points during people's settlement experiences, we have shown how inclusion journeys are actively negotiated by people and through the places they interact with, over time.

The emphasis on time, in its messy recount of experiences and events, confirms that integration:

1. starts from day one of arrival,
2. is influenced - but not defined - by the experiences of the asylum/resettlement entry route and
3. is not linear but is a continuous, evolving

process.

Our focus on place (with research in two areas and with both long-term residents and New Scots) confirms the relevance of understanding integration as a process that requires a reciprocal engagement with long-term residents, as well as knowledge of the physical and social infrastructures that influence interaction with others. Further understanding of the similarities and differences in perceptions of connectedness held by long-term residents and newcomers, as well of the places where meaningful interaction can take place, is critical in the current context where new local authorities are receiving refugees across Scotland, at a time when third sector and statutory service providers face significant resource challenges.⁶

Overall, the research has confirmed social connections to be central to a holistic approach to integration. Social connections not only enhance agency and promote belonging, but they are also key to facilitating access to resources, opportunities and other relationships. Connections are conducive to the achievement of peoples' goals across the means and markers integration domains. These connections also have a knock-on effect on the building of relationships that allow people to live the lives they want for themselves and their families:

I can only think of the asylum process as – I got support from almost everybody that I met, that I can still make good out of my life, that's why the flat doesn't look like that, and during the asylum process I was able to start college which gave me more hope, and direction to become what I have never thought I can become. Because it is through this process and the people I met during the asylum process, they encouraged me and they gave me hope which made me think of how to give a good life to my children to be their role model, that they can look at me that despite all that happened mummy still managed to do

something out of her life.
(Jay)

These findings deepen understandings of the meaning of these connections in ways that are relevant to:

1. service provision, to better understand models of delivery and its impact;
2. to policy making, as it shows the need to develop spaces that promote connectedness, but also that social connections, while key, cannot alone overcome structural constraints;
3. to refugees and long-term residents, as it puts emphasis on the mutual need for connectedness, and how we value social connections across time and in shared places.

Overall, this research has contributed to an enhanced understanding of the role of social connections moving away from the focus on outcomes alone, to the meaning of these connections over time and in place. The implications of this work to policy and practice are outlined in the new recommendations below (which we suggest reading alongside our previous reports).

6. Implications and 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.
- Work with private and public sector partners to offer tailored, sector-specific support according to individual skills and aspirations. Our research has emphasised the gap in support for highly qualified professionals who would benefit, for example, from sector-specific mentorship and internship opportunities.
- Support refugees' entrepreneurial ambitions, including providing liaison with Local Authorities in the area in which interested refugee entrepreneurs reside, so that they can access up-to-date guidance
- Integration Service must have at its core personal contact and opportunity to build relationship of trust with a person.

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.
- Ensure that learning from integration service provision influences development of current and future national integration strategies.

The UK Government should:

- Ringfence funding to support the Scottish Government and Scottish Local Authorities with delivering recommendations in this report.
- Long-term, sustainable investment should

recognise the centrality of physical and social infrastructure which promote social cohesion and indirectly further socio-economic resilience.

- Ensure future integration policy recognises the importance of social connections and their diverse forms, functions and meanings.
- 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:

- Explore the impact of entry routes on developing and sustaining social connections and wider integration for resettled and asylum route refugees.
- Investigate opportunities for refugee or other migrant background people in entrepreneurship in different parts of Scotland.
- Further develop research methods that engage all residents in integration research and promote community cohesion.

7. Endnotes

¹ In a fast-moving political landscape, our partners were adapting to their expanded remit to provide an integration service to people arriving on Ukrainian visas and through the Afghan resettlement scheme; and also responding to the impacts on service provision of the new Illegal Migration Act 2023.

² We discuss in previous reports that this finding may be subject to selection bias due to our sample consisting only of people using the Integration Service.

³ The most recent [House of Commons research briefing](#) states 'There were no Afghan households classified as living in bridging accommodation

on 31 August 2023. But 341 families (1,826 people) were being [accommodated by the Home Office in “interim” hotel accommodation](#) pending a move to longer-term accommodation. Most interim accommodation sites had previously been used as bridging accommodation.’

⁴ <https://www.lawscot.org.uk/members/journal/issues/vol-68-issue-08/broken-words-the-illegal-migration-act/>

⁵ Due to short-notice logistical challenges, the research team decided to alter the Maryhill refugee workshop agenda and host separate individual interviews with the three participants rather than engage them together in a group activity.

⁶ These include changes in the models of service provision because of new legislation and constrained funding, among others.

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