

# Interim Report 1: Exploring social connections: summary of 1<sup>st</sup> stage of data collection with Afghan refugees

Nicole Vidal, Gianluca Palombo

## 1. Introduction

All 32 Scottish Local Authorities (LAs) have signed up for the Afghan Citizen Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) in the UK, with 16 LAs already resettling Afghan refugees. While integration services in LAs with previous resettlement experience, such as Glasgow, already draw heavily upon the social connections approach to integration, there is scope to develop and build social connections capacity in LAs with little previous resettlement experience.

In relatively remote LAs, or LAs with little previous resettlement experience, there is scope to improve the provision of integration services through a closer understanding of social connections needs and building social connections capacity across beneficiaries, locals, and service providers. Within this context, LAs have identified the need to sustain social connections capacity to support newly arriving families both in LAs themselves and in the areas in which Afghan refugees already reside. There is therefore a clear social connections gap in the provision of integration services in LAs with little previous resettlement experience that our research aims to address by engaging holistically with the communities themselves, including refugees, locals, and service providers in the relevant LAs through qualitative research.

The project aims to better understand the key social connections that refugees, locals, and service providers in Edinburgh, Fife and Aberdeen identify as important to integration in local authorities with little previous resettlement experience.

This Interim Report summarises findings from three interviews and one workshop undertaken with Afghan beneficiaries of the ABM AMIF3 funded project 'New Scots: Pathways to Economic and Social Inclusion. Afghan extension'. In this phase, the Queen Margaret University research team focused on Afghan refugees' experiences arriving and settling in Scotland and the social connections that they have established so far. The findings described here show some of the main challenges Afghan resettled refugees are facing in accessing permanent housing and adequate employment, as well as some barriers in establishing wider social connections.

## 2. Methods

To date we have conducted three one-to-one research interviews and two beneficiary workshops with refugees in Edinburgh and Fife. The aims of the research interviews and beneficiary workshops are to: map Afghan cohort social connections, identify importance of non-refugee specific social connections to Afghan cohort, map social connections relevant to integration identified by Afghan beneficiaries, amplify beneficiary voices, identify, explore and gain a better understanding of the multi-directionality of integration, and convey and discuss Afghan beneficiary cohort experiences of integration so far (which can complement evaluation and assessment activities conducted by service providers and LAs). Ethical approval for this project was granted by the QMU Research Ethics Panel on 17 June 2022, before data collection started in August 2022.

A sample of nine participants was obtained by an Integration Advisor at Scottish Refugee Council from those recorded on the database as being supported by Scottish Refugee Council and living in temporary hotel accommodation. Individuals were first contacted by Scottish Refugee Council to check they were happy to be contacted by the research team, who then followed up to arrange a suitable time to interview them and to invite them to the beneficiary workshop. Each interview was conducted in person by a researcher who used participative mapping methods to discuss the people and organisations that had been important to participants in their lives in Scotland. For the individual interviews, participants were asked a series of questions about their journey and arrival to

their current accommodation in Scotland. All individual interviews and the beneficiary workshop included questions to ascertain the social connections which are most and least important to their lives in Scotland. All participants were offered interpreters.

The research team has conducted three face-to-face individual interviews and five participants took part in the beneficiary workshop. An interpreter was present for one of the three in-person interviews as well as the beneficiary workshop. Emails and texts with invitations to participate in a research interview have been sent to all members from the original sample, however, there have been limited replies thus far. The research team is continuing to liaise with research partners to request further support in reaching potential participants. A summary of preliminary findings obtained from the research interviews and the first workshop with beneficiaries is included below. Pseudonyms are used throughout this report.

### 3. Interview participant profiles

Table 1: Interview participant profile

Participant number	Pseudonym	Location of hotel	Gender and family status	Time in Scotland
Participant 1	Asadi	Fife	Male, living with wife and 3 children	3 months (at time of interview)
Participant 2	Aarash	Edinburgh	Male, living with wife and 3 children	3 months (at time of interview)
Participant 3	Khaled	Edinburgh	Male, living with wife and	4 months (at time of interview)

## 4. Interview findings

### 4.1. Journey and arrival to Scotland

The participants who were interviewed one-to-one both experienced harrowing and traumatic events in the run-up to their journey to Scotland. Both participants were working for the British Forces when the Taliban began occupation of Afghanistan and were subject to torture. After some delays with travel documentation, all were able to make the journey to Scotland with their immediate families. Asadi arrived elsewhere in the UK and had to take a long bus journey with his wife and children to Fife. Asadi explained how they initially weren't aware they were headed to Scotland. This was not so much of an issue, however they had limited time to prepare and did not have access to British currency to buy food or water. They were not offered any food or drink on the bus which was particularly stressful for them given they were travelling with small children.

*"We didn't know that we were going to have to move to Scotland ... We are told that we are going to go and [the bus driver] said that we are going we have a long journey to Scotland. We told him okay, no problem but can we get any food or some water? We had some money with us like dollars in euros, but when we were going to the shops they were saying no, only pounds. And then we had to tell the driver to please, please buy us some water because the children are crying for the water" (Asadi).*

Aarash and Khaled had a more straightforward arrival, both going straight to Edinburgh.

### 4.2. Challenges

All three one-to-one interview participants expressed appreciation for their arrival in Scotland and the chance to feel safe once again. However, they all recounted several challenges, many of which to do with the accommodation but others more general to their respective situations.

Aarash expressed feelings of anguish over the change his family had been through. Recounting the open fields and comfort of being near extended family in the Afghan countryside, he felt a deep sadness that his children could not play as freely or with the same degree of safety in the middle of the city. He is also worried about his wife who fears she will be judged or treated poorly due to cultural differences of dress.

*"We just been stuck in the hotel, [we] don't have any freedom you know, and even for my wife ... with a totally different culture, my wife cannot dress freely" (Aarash).*

All participants expressed great frustration at their inability to move forward with their lives. Khaled spoke adamantly that the temporality of their accommodation consumes his mind and he cannot focus on anything else. He feels his life is on hold until he can move his family to more permanent housing. Aarash lamented that despite having a master's degree and applying to several entry level or unskilled labour jobs, he hadn't even been invited to interview. Aarash was aware that his limited English language ability was a hindrance.

*"I had master you know, over there. I was working on in the office, I've applied for a job unsuccessfully. [If only] they can make the criteria of admission easier. So people like me or my wife or others, can have the opportunity so they can integrate quicker" (Aarash).*

Asadi, having been an interpreter in Afghanistan, has been able to work in a shop as a volunteer, however, expresses similar frustration at this liminal stage of his family's life. Likewise, Khaled knows he has to start over with his career.

*"It's life back to the drawing board for me and getting my work done to try to set [my business] here in the UK" (Khaled).*

Asadi and Aarash both commented on the food at the hotel. They spoke in detail about how difficult it was to be offered poor quality food, sometimes mouldy and usually rationed. They both saw this as a blow to their dignity and felt shame at not being able to provide additional food for their children when asked. Food was not as much as an issue for Khaled. Having worked in relief programmes before, he was aware that there is not always flexibility in what they are offered. All expressed challenges with their housing situation. They commented that they felt there was no end in sight to hotel accommodation with limited to no communication about when or how they would be able to move to permanent housing. Asadi mentioned that he had heard through a friend that the Home Office is sending letters advising refugees to search for their own housing given shortages of Council housing, however he has not received this notification yet. All three participants commented that families requiring more than two bedrooms are experiencing greater difficulty and lengthier delays in being moved to permanent accommodation. Though they reiterated their appreciation at feeling safe, they all felt they were in a state of limbo, causing great stress and affecting their mental health.

#### 4.3. Social Connections

All participants had been in contact with their respective Councils as well as case workers from Scottish Refugee Council. Their experiences with both were largely positive.

*"Well, of course the city council, they basically are teaching us how to live here in [Scotland]" (Khaled).*

*"There is a team every day in the hotel, so anytime we ask for help, they can help us" (Aarash).*

Other organisations they had been in contact with were from their children's schools and the NHS. Asadi recounted several negative experiences with medical workers when one of his children needed medical care. Aarash explained that he has not had a chance to interact with many people or organisations since he and his family had only arrived recently. Aside from Jobcentre Plus, none of the participants had been in contact with organisations in relation to employability and any questions they had regarding accommodation were dealt with primarily through the Council. Their main priority in terms of finding a job is improving their English language communication skills. Aarash mentions that he values the English language classes, however, sometimes he feels they can be overcrowded and unstructured.

Asadi and Khaled had been able to create large social circles with other Afghan people and were grateful for this. Aarash has not had the chance to socialise with many people outside the hotel. Their views on social connections resonated with the core domains of refugee integration. All agreed that increasing their social networks is a practical step toward integration. Despite several ongoing challenges, Asadi and Khaled at least feel they have a support network in their current location.

Aarash is content for the time being to remain in Fife, however he is aware he would have limited opportunities to start a retail business, such as the one he ran in Afghanistan, living outside of a city. Khaled also ran an athletic business in Afghanistan and would like to reinstate a similar business in Scotland, however he does not have the funds or contacts to do so. All three expressed concern for their respective wives who have been experiencing high degrees of anxiety living in the hotel with limited to no social support systems.

#### 4.4. Participant hopes and recommendations for the future

Aarash adamantly condemned the lack of organisation at the government level. He hopes that any future arrivals will not have to go through a similar ordeal. All commented that they feel they are treated differently to Ukrainian arrivals and attributed this to discrimination. All hope they can transition to permanent housing soon but would at least welcome more information and communication from housing authorities.

Aarash would like more opportunities for meeting people. Asadi and Aarash both felt they would have benefited from more orientation upon arrival in order to have a greater understanding of cultural norms and how to navigate the formal structures and systems (e.g. health, education, employment) in Scotland. Khaled agreed this would be useful for new arrivals, however he explained that prior to arriving in Scotland he had worked with many Europeans, British and North Americans and felt he knew what to expect during his arrival.

## 5. Beneficiary Workshop Insights

Our first beneficiary workshop took place on the 23 September. Five people from Afghanistan, who had been resettled in Scotland in the previous year or so, took part in this research activity. Attendees were based in either Edinburgh or Fife, and at least one had also spent time living in Aberdeen since arriving from Afghanistan. All were men ranging from young adult to middle-aged or older (we did not survey the age of participants).

In the workshop, which included discussions of two questions that incorporated social connections mapping onto a flowchart (See Figure 1), some of the themes raised reflected those raised in our one-to-one interviews. One such theme was the psychologically restrictive limbo of persisting waits for permanent housing.

*“Life for us technically hasn't started. integration becomes really difficult when you're living with 100 Afghan families. And the only contact that you have with the Scottish or the English people is when you go out and buy something so the communication is only like how much and then when you pay and you come back. So you don't learn anything. You don't speak anything. You're not exchanging culture just yet because you're [still in] transition” (Khaled).*

Another common issue raised was that of the difficulty in accessing decent occupations. Several participants agreed that informal work was common, with some Afghan people in Scotland receiving compensation from certain employers for recruiting multiple members from their own local network - with whom they knew there was a desire for job opportunities.

There was also a common understanding that some Afghan people were struggling to access quality job opportunities due to problems getting to grips with new systems such as online job searching. Several participants felt that if their English was further improved, getting and passing job interviews in relevant professions would be far less difficult.

The difficulty in acquiring stronger English was frequently linked by participants to the common problem of psychological and financial uncertainty caused by their persistent temporary and uncertain housing status.

Despite these significant challenges, participants spoke confidently of the trust they had in public sector actors who were an accessible and reassuring point of support. These included local authority and home office caseworkers that had been helpful to them. Participants also agreed that they had trust in the Police when asked if they would reach out to the service in the case of being impacted by crime.

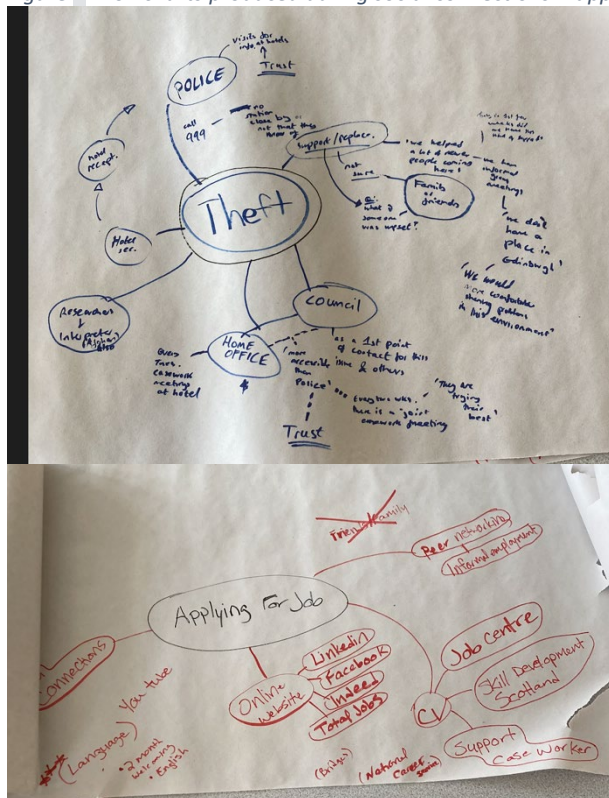
Participants did not stress the importance of support from family and friends in accessing education, work and housing. Instead, they mentioned the importance of public body representatives with whom they had already had contact with, such as the Home Office, Local Authorities, Job Centres and Skills Development Scotland. This speaks to a potentiality that the wider demographic of people resettled within the ACRS in Edinburgh and Fife are at this common stage of being unable yet to access or support each other to access their aspired markers of integration.

There was strong support for acknowledging the general importance of existing local and informal networks of Afghan people housed in hotels in offering critical psychological support. Two participants knew each other from one such network in Edinburgh. Participants in the group also mentioned that more recently settled Afghan people were benefitting from useful contacts shared with previously settled Afghan people in these networks.

As also mentioned in our one-to-one interview findings, however, there were calls for greater support from public and other bodies in supporting these Afghan networks – with one participant already looking to draw on his voluntary sector experience gained in Afghanistan to build a cohesive community group for Edinburgh Afghan people to network.

In our second beneficiary workshop, we are keen to include the voices of Afghan women to deduce if they are any important differences in their experiences and social connections building.

Figure 1: Flowcharts produced during social connections mapping workshops with Afghan beneficiaries



## 6. Conclusion

In many ways, the experiences of research participants in one-to-one interviews and in the group workshop were characteristic of those more widely recorded from people seeking refuge in the UK. One common theme such as this was the persistent psychological struggle associated with adapting to a vastly different living environment, dealing with traumatic journeys on route to Scotland, and having also to deal with the fear of racial or ethnic discrimination.

Conversations also confirmed commonly reported struggles in specific emergency accommodation for resettled Afghan people. This included strong complaints about inadequate nutrition. However, even more focus was given from participants about the general psychological challenge of being stuck in temporary hotel accommodation. There was a strong shared idea that Afghan people's living

situation left them in a state of limbo that negatively impacted on their ability to develop facilitators of integration such as language skills and cultural knowledge – facilitators that are crucial in establishing key means and markers of integration, such as employment. There was also much concern shared by participants about the everyday psychological impact on partners and children by living in hotel accommodation for an indefinite period of time - which for some has already lasted a year or more. For these reasons above, housing issues can be viewed as a major obstacle for people when attempting to build wider social connections that would allow them to move forward with their lives.

There was, however, a shared positive perception of the work of some key asylum support service delivery partners, including local authority and home office officials - whom participants felt were a reliable and accessible point of contact. Participants appreciated the work done by these key officials and expressed trust in other public and third sector actors that they had encountered, such as the Police and Skills Development Scotland. Nevertheless, some participants did say that they felt comparatively unfairly treated by government officials whom they felt had offered greater support to Ukrainian people seeking refuge in the UK.

## 7. Next steps

In addition to continuing participant recruitment and interviews, the research team will be conducting the remaining shared learning workshops with local organisations, Local Authorities and project partners. These workshops, to be held with representatives from Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Fife will allow us to obtain a more detailed analysis of the social connections available to Afghan beneficiaries. Page Break

### Suggested citation

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*Migration, Integration and Social Connection Team Psychosocial Wellbeing, Integration and Protection Cluster Institute for Global Health and Development | Queen Margaret University*