



Support for Scotland's Afghan refugee people:  
exploring social connections in Local Authorities  
with little previous resettlement experience

# Executive Summary

This document summarises the findings and recommendations of the extension phase of the ABM AMIF3 funded project 'New Scots: Pathways to Economic and Social Inclusion' focussing on Afghan citizens who have been resettled or temporarily accommodated in Bridging hotels in Scotland. The research component of the project has been led by Queen Margaret University in partnership with the Scottish Refugee Council, the Bridges Programme and the Workers' Educational Association.

This project aimed to understand the key social connections that Afghan refugee people, local organisations, and service providers identify as important to integration in local authorities with little previous resettlement experience. Our objective for this study was to amplify Afghan beneficiary voices and to convey and discuss Afghan beneficiary experiences of integration thus far to complement evaluation and assessment activities conducted by service providers and Local Authorities, primarily in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Fife. To achieve this, we investigated the following research question and research aims:

- What are the key social connections that refugee people, local organisations, and service providers identify as important to integration in local authorities with little previous resettlement experience?
- Map Afghan beneficiary social connections, including:
  - Identifying the importance of non-refugee specific social connections to Afghan beneficiaries;
  - Identifying any social connections relevant to integration identified by Afghan beneficiaries, as well as the ones identified by locals, and service providers; and
  - Gaining a better understanding of the multi-directionality of integration.

As well as a literature review, our research consisted of three one-to-one interviews and two group workshops with seven resettled Afghan people who were beneficiaries of our project partners. We followed this with three workshops

with local organisations, Local Authorities and project partners, respectively. Across our interviews and workshops, participants represented Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Fife as well as other areas with little previous resettlement experience. Our research was underpinned by a theoretical focus on the indicators of integration and the related importance of social connections in facilitating integration. In our workshops with Afghan people and local organisations, we undertook social connections mapping to highlight key actors and relationships which are or could facilitate integration in each area. Our workshops with Local Authorities and project partners then allowed us to collect feedback on our social connections maps and gain further perspective of the structural issues affecting the building of key social connections.

## Key Findings

### Social Connections

Resettled Afghan people living in hotels relied overwhelmingly upon Local Authority, Home Office and Scottish Refugee Council caseworkers to provide important advice and support. One of the reasons for this appears to be the isolating nature of this form of accommodation - despite participants voicing a desire to move out, find work and come into contact more with local Scottish people. Afghan people are relying on informal peer networks of other Afghan people living in hotels for psychological support, including for assisting with trauma. For other refugee people in areas with little previous resettlement experience, forging close social connections with historic community residents in clubs and projects was key to positive wellbeing and integration to their new communities.

### Accommodation

Living in hotels for extended periods of time was causing physical and psychological distress for Afghan people in Scotland. Preoccupation with insecure housing status meant that Afghan people were finding it difficult to progress with other activities including English language development and job seeking.

### Job Seeking

Being unable to work in a fulfilling job had a significantly negative impact on Afghan people's wellbeing and their ability to progress their means and markers of integration. Inability to progress as quickly with English language skills as they preferred was impacting Afghan people's success in finding fulfilling jobs that they were otherwise qualified for.

### English Language Development

Afghan people and local organisations shared concerns over the quality and quantity of ESOL courses available in different parts of Scotland.

### Mental Health

Living in hotel accommodation for an extended period appeared to be a significant cause of psychological distress for resettled Afghan people in Scotland. It is likely that resettled Afghan people are also suffering from trauma associated with their journey to and arrival in Scotland.

### Waiting

The feeling of waiting or limbo is so pervasive in the refugee experience that its impact requires specific attention.

## Regional Infrastructure

There is a general lack of critical refugee support infrastructure in areas with little previous resettlement experience which are also overburdened by forces such as Brexit and the Cost of Living Crisis. These gaps include lack of interpreting services, accessible legal aid, community spaces for peer and cross-cultural networking, and a lack of key service provider training in multicultural and trauma-informed practice.

## Key Recommendations

### For all:

- Support the building of social connections for refugee people and others in their communities – for example, by facilitating inclusive access to local organisations and local activities such as language cafes and sports clubs.

### Future integration services should:

- Continue to incorporate discussions of social connections into integration planning and activities.
- Continue efforts to share information between all actors at the local and national levels to develop mutually beneficial priorities.

### COSLA, Local Authorities, statutory services and New Scots working groups should:

- Ensure that key service providers in areas with little previous resettlement experience have appropriately equipped interpreting services as well as training in delivering multiculturally sensitive and trauma-informed practice.
- Take part in routine cross-sector, intra-regional, cross-regional and lived-experience-informed forums and operational groups to share best practice and build critical partnerships that benefit community integration and refugee people's wellbeing in different parts of Scotland.

### The Scottish Government should:

- Provide ringfenced funding to ensure Local Authorities and local organisations can access training in trauma-informed and multiculturally sensitive one-to-one and community-based practice; can run projects which facilitate integration; and can access interpreting services for clients.
- Increase legal aid funding to ensure refugee people are not unfairly denied access to support and do not have to rely on stretched third sector crisis services across the country.

### The UK Government should:

- Entrust Local Authorities to engineer their own housing solutions for refugee people, rather than continue an approach lacking consultation at national and regional level.

### Future Research should:

- Harness the support of all actors above to facilitate a robust cross-regional study of the effectiveness of national integration policy, analysing geographical nuances and incorporating longitudinal research. Queen Margaret University will actively build upon this previous project's partnership-building to develop this research agenda.

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The full report can be found here: <https://miscintegrationresearch.org/publications> or scan the QR code.



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