



Research Briefing

The role of social connections
in refugees' pathways to social
and economic inclusion

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The role of social connections in refugees' pathways to social and economic inclusion

Introduction

This research briefing summarises findings from the research component of the AMIF-funded ABM₃ project Pathways to Social and Economic Inclusion. The ABM₃ project supports recently recognised refugees in Scotland. Service provision by Scottish Refugee Council, Bridges Programmes and Workers' Educational Association includes individual integration planning, employability support and access to English language learning. The research element has been led by Queen Margaret University's Institute for Global Health and Development (IGHD). The Institute hosts a specialist Migrant Integration and Social Connections team who have worked in partnership with service delivery organisations on the ABM₃ project since January 2021.

Background & research aim

Social connections, in other words people's relationships with individuals, organisations and statutory bodies, are critical to integration. They can help people to achieve functional goals such as finding employment; are important to people's feelings of acceptance and belonging and can change social attitudes towards migrants. However, evidence of how people build these relationships, at what stage and to what effect remains limited. Our aim was to explore these questions to develop a better understanding of the role of social connections in integration. This included testing the use of an online survey tool to support integration planning.

About the research

Our research used a Social Connections Mapping Tool that had been developed by the IGHD in previous work with refugees. This mixed-methods tool comprises two elements: an online survey and mapping workshops. The survey asks respondents about their recent contact with, and trust in people and organisations. Respondents' answers generate individual and group level maps which visualise their connections. Practitioners were trained and supported to use the maps to discuss social connections with refugees.

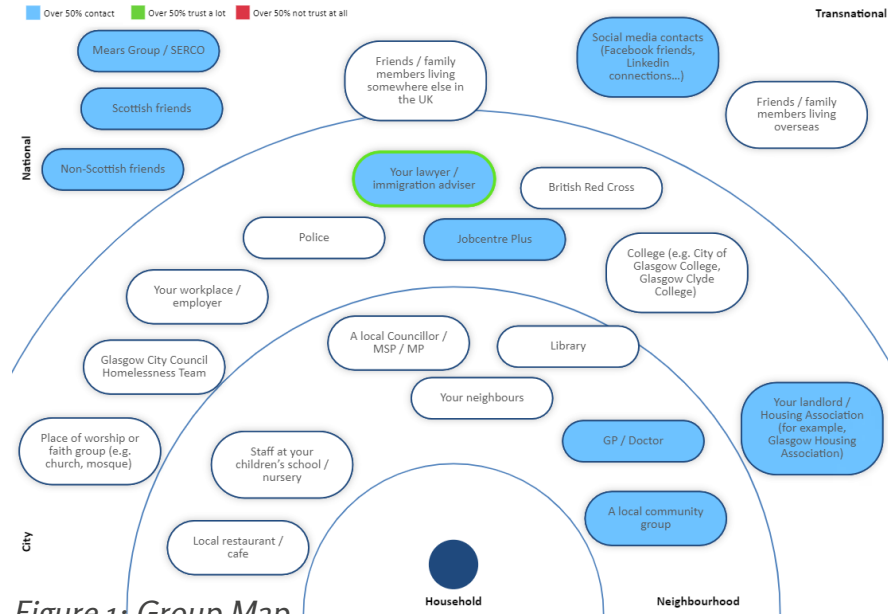


Figure 1: Group Map

The workshops use scenarios and a ranking exercise to discuss the people and organisations in Scotland that have been important to service beneficiaries. 31 beneficiaries took part in mapping workshops or individual discussions. The research team also facilitated two workshops with 9 peer volunteers and 4 learning sessions with project staff. This enabled the team to embed feedback from practitioners throughout the project.

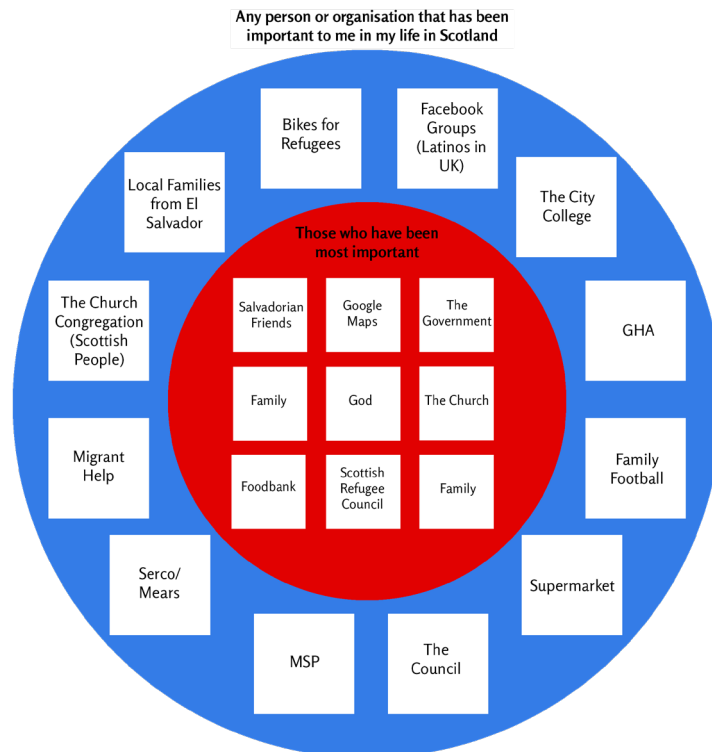


Figure 2: Bullseye Chart of Important Connections

Key findings 1 - using social connections discussions in practice

The first four findings focus on the team's work to encourage practitioners to use the social connections survey and maps in their everyday work with refugees.

1. Discussions about social connections need to take place in context

The initial social connections survey asked about whom people might go to for help or support but without specifying why they would need assistance. Feedback from practitioners and refugees indicated that this was less helpful than asking about whom people would approach for help with a specific topic, for example finding a home or looking for a job. The survey was updated midway through the project to reflect this.

2. Social connections mapping creates a space for more holistic, less transactional conversations

Practitioners who used the survey and discussed individual maps with their clients enjoyed having the opportunity to discuss people's wider social worlds. They felt this led to more holistic conversations where they could engage with people's aspirations and identify new connections they might wish to make.

"These are the kind of conversations we like to have with our clients, connecting with people and hearing other people's interests. [...] The survey shifts practice from a more transactional to a more holistic conversation on aspirations."

(Integration Adviser)

3. Social connections discussions are more relevant to some beneficiaries than others

Advisers explained that some refugees did not find the survey relevant to their circumstances and so were unwilling to complete it. Generally, people who were confident in their English skills and were on a pathway to employment appeared to be more ready to engage with this and other research activities than those who still addressing more immediate needs. This reflects the impact of time and personal circumstances on integration and the importance of taking a person-centred approach to integration planning.

4. The external environment and limited resources affect practitioners' capacity

Only 18 surveys were completed through practitioners. Advisers have told us that they often lack the time required to use the social connections mapping survey in their everyday work. This is primarily due to workload pressures, including the significant time spent resolving barriers to key services. These pressures have been exacerbated during the project by the shifting external environment. External factors that have impacted on the research have included Covid-19 public health restrictions and the arrival in Scotland of significant numbers of Ukrainian and Afghan refugees.

Key findings 2: the impact of social connections on integration

The next set of findings explore the role and impact of social connections in integration based on qualitative data gathered during the project.

5. Time is crucial to understanding the role of social connections

Some types of social connections, for example with places of worship and friends, are crucial from the moment of arrival. These relationships provide emotional and practical support across different transition points in people's lives. Other connections have a role only at certain times, for example during the asylum process (solicitor / Mears Group / Home Office) or in the period immediately after receiving status (homelessness services, some AMIF partners). Building deeper connections requires time in a place, which can build familiarity and a sense of ease and comfort:

“As time goes by, I be more comfortable and familiar to the place around me”
(Employability Workshop Participant)

The role and importance of a relationship with the same person or organisation can also change over time: for example, a neighbour might become a close friend or offer help with childcare, or a service may no longer be relevant to someone's needs.

6. Positive connections have an impact on confidence and hope as well as on more functional outcomes

Refugee-assisting agencies play a key role in connecting people to other important services and ensuring that they can access their rights. Many participants described ongoing support from AMIF partners as having been one of the most important connections in their lives. AMIF partner organisations and staff had helped them move towards outcomes including accessing sustainable and suitable housing, and moving into employment or education. These outcomes are represented by green stars on the pathways map below.

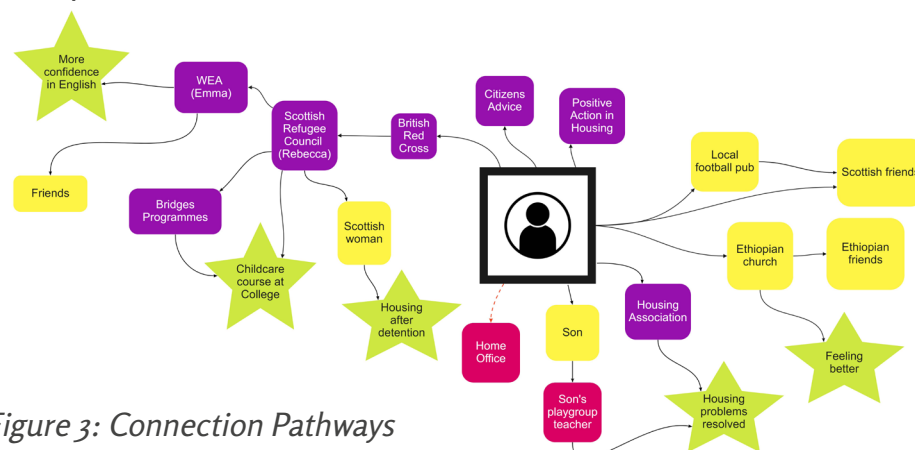


Figure 3: Connection Pathways

Participants identified the importance of their relationships with specific individuals within these and other organisations. Feeling consistently supported over time by individual workers was important in reaching outcomes such as improved confidence and hope.

“Anita was giving me hope all the time, and I was thinking that I can do something. And if I was not succeeded, then Anita is there for me.” (Housing Interview Participant)

Numerous examples of acts of care undertaken by workers that go beyond their institutional remit were given, primarily from within the voluntary sector but also from some statutory agencies.

7. Not all social connections are positive – some are characterised by mistrust or by obligation

The quantity of connections does not indicate the quality of connection. Several instances were recounted whereby participants felt obliged to engage with certain institutions because of their circumstances but these connections were not experienced positively.

“it’s been for more than eight months, that my property has a problem [...] But the housing, they didn’t help us properly [...] they really ignored us, they didn’t do their job [...] it’s good to say that always it’s not everything perfect or good for us.”
(Employability Workshop Participant)

It is also important not to assume that connections with co-nationals will be productive or positive. Some people expressed mistrust in communities linked with their home countries, or felt that more established migrants from the same country were unwilling to make friends with people seeking asylum:

“usually Turkish people doesn’t want to talk another people who they knew come from Turkey [as asylum seekers] actually, they don’t want to be friends and close with them.” (Interview Participant)

People may prefer to engage with communities of shared interest built around common experiences that cut across identities of nationality and language.

8. Social connections support refugees’ agency but cannot fully resolve systems barriers

Having positive relationships with formal organisations as well as informal friendships contributes to people feeling confident and being informed about their rights. This in turn can support refugees’ agency in accessing their rights and advocating for themselves. However, certain statutory bodies, including those that control social housing allocations and access to financial support remain inflexible. In several instances refugees were unable to resolve problems with statutory systems directly and had to rely upon advice and support from others do so. The time spent by practitioners in fielding enquiries about systems barriers and administrative errors is a critical element that reduces their ability to focus on people’s longer-term goals.

“we need to actually record problems and issues with benefits and housing ... it is difficult to focus on long term objectives when people don’t have stable income.”
(Integration Adviser)

This confirms that integration is a multi-directional and relational process. Refugees cannot achieve their aspirations for social and economic inclusion alone. Integration also relies on the willingness of others to adapt, and commitment from state actors to remove systems barriers.

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