Interim Report 8

1. Introduction

This Interim Report summarises findings from a series of interviews and surveys conducted with beneficiaries of the ABM AMIF3 funded project 'New Scots: Pathways to Economic and Social Inclusion'. This work was undertaken as part of the project extension period.

The Queen Margaret University research team built on their findings from years one and two of the project to:

- explore the role of social connections in employability.
- discuss the contribution made by AMIF partners to participants' employment journeys.
- explore how individual circumstances, including housing situation, impact social networks that support employability.

The report presents preliminary findings relating to these questions, with additional analysis relating to broader themes of friendship and information.

2. Methodology

The research team conducted interviews with 24 people between May and June 2023. Thirteen of these same interview participants also completed an online social connections employability survey. The sample of participants was drawn by the Monitoring and Evaluation Officer at Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) from people who were referred to AMIF-funded employability services at SRC or Bridges Programmes between January 2021 and May 2023. Individuals were first contacted by SRC volunteers to check they were happy to be contacted by the research team. Where consent was given, the team arranged a suitable time to interview them.

Each interview was conducted either in person (n=11) or online (n=13) using interpreters where requested. The researchers used a visual mapping method to discuss the people and organisations that had been important to participants in their lives in Scotland. When these had been noted, participants were asked to identify who had been the most important. An example of the 'bullseye' method used to map these connections is below at Figure 1. The interview included additional questions about participants' experiences of their journey towards employment and the suitability of their housing.

Following the interview, participants were asked to complete a short online survey. This was adapted in consultation with staff at Scottish Refugee Council to explore levels of contact, trust and reciprocity with people and organisations relevant to their employability journey. Thirteen out of 24 interviewees completed the survey. The drop-off in numbers reflects a range of issues including technical difficulties with the survey, lack of time to complete the survey during the interview and non-response after the interview. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the report to refer to participants.

Figure 1: Bullseye Map – Liliya

Liliya arrived on a Ukrainian visa and lived on a cruise ship docked in Glasgow until March 2023 when she and her husband were offered a permanent home just outside Glasgow.

Interim Report 8

Any person or organisation that has been important to me in my life in Scotland

Those who have been most important to me

Ukrainian Group/Hub

Interpreters in Coatbridge

Coatbridge council (worker)

Friend from the Hub

Refuweegee

Kelvingrove College ESOL

Job centre

GP/Doctor

Bridges Programmes

Salvation Army

Telegram (social media popular in Ukraine)

Football club (volunteering)

Glasgow West -- Declined housing offer

Community group (volunteering)

Volunteers (Refugee Centre + Chapel/church)

People plus

Social media (Instagram, Telegram, Whatsapp)

Community English Classes

3. Participant Profile

This sample of interviewees is summarised in table one. Most participants spoke a good level of English, many were highly educated and nearly all had lived in Scotland for at least 2 years, with two participants having been in Scotland for 10 years or more, and another for just under 10 years. The notable exceptions were Liliya and Anna who had arrived on Ukrainian visas and been in Scotland for around 8 months at the time of interview. These were the only interviewees apart from one other (Shokoor) who had arrived through resettlement schemes. All other interviewees had claimed asylum in the UK. Those who were interviewed included 14 men, and 10 women. Of these, 14 participants were living with their children, evenly split between male and female interviewees. Three women were single mothers, and one man was a single father. All other parents were living with their spouse. All but two participants, who had relocated to England to find work, were living in Glasgow. Participants came from a range of countries including Nigeria, Cameroon, Brazil, El Salvador, Yemen, Cote d'Ivoire, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Sudan, Pakistan and Egypt.

Interim Report 8

Table one: participant profile

Participant pseudonym	Gender and family status	Time in Scotland	Settlement pathway	Granted Status	Suitability of housing (self-assessed)	In employment or education	Employment commensurate with skills and qualifications (self-assessed)
Marvin	Man, living alone	> 5 years but <10 years	Asylum Route	2020	Suitable	Studying	No
David	Man, living with wife and children	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum route	2020	Suitable	Employed F/T	Unclear
Jorge	Man, living with wife and child	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum Route	2021	Suitable	Employed	Yes
Funke	Woman, living with children	> 10 years	Asylum Route	2021	Suitable	Employed	Yes
Ayman	Man, living alone	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum Route	2021	Suitable	Employed	On the right pathway
Amir	Man, living with child	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum route	2022	Suitable	Studying, soon to start a business	On the right pathway
Walter	Man, living alone	> 5 years but < 10 years	Asylum Route	2019	Suitable	Unemployed	No
Silvan	Man, living alone	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum Route	2022	Not suitable	Unemployed	No
Tariq	Man, living alone?	> 5 years but < 10 years	Asylum Route	2022	Suitable	Working, studying F/T	No
Javid	Man living with wife and children	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum route	2021	Suitable	Working F/T	Yes
Julie	Woman, living with husband and children	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum Route	2021	Suitable	F/T Education	N/A
Akif	Man, living with wife and children	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum route	2021	Suitable	Employed P/T Volunteering P/T	Paid work – no Volunteering - yes
Ali	Man, living alone	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum route	2022	Suitable	Unemployed	No
Paulo	Man, with children	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum Route	2022	Not suitable	Unemployed	No
Hena	Woman, living with children	> 5 years but < 10 years	Asylum Route	2022	No information	Unemployed	No
Yasmin	Woman, living with husband	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum Route	06/2020 3+ years	Suitable	Studying	N/A
Abebi	Woman, living with children	> 10 years	Asylum Route	2020	Suitable	Studying and working	Yes
Veronica	Woman, living with children	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum Route	01/2021	Suitable	Studying	N/A
Samuel	Man, living alone	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum route	10/2021	Suitable	Studying	N/A
Lisa	Woman, living alone	> 5 years but < 10 years	Asylum route	2020	Suitable	Some self - employed work	Unable to work due to health problems
Firdaus	Woman, living with husband and children	> 2 years but < 5 years	Asylum route	2022	Suitable, temporary	Trying to set up own social enterprise	No
Anna	Woman, living with parents	7-12 months	Ukrainian Visa	2022	Suitable, some complaints	Studying Working P/T	N/A
Shokoor	Man, living with wife and children	> 2 years but < 5 years	Afghan Resettlement Scheme	2022 (had shorter leave)	Not suitable	Self - employed	No
Liliya	Woman, living with husband	7-12 months	Ukrainian visa	Ukranian visa pre-23/09/2022	Suitable	Volunteering and looking for a job	N/A

Interim Report 8

4. Social Connections Employability Survey

Thirteen people completed the social connections employability survey. Of these 9 were men, and 4 were women. Nine had come through the asylum route, and one had entered on a resettlement visa, 3 answered 'other' or 'unsure'. Five were aged between 25-34, five between 35-44 and three between 45-54. Six respondents were in employment, one of whom was also volunteering. Two participants were volunteering and 5 were neither working nor volunteering. The diagram below at figure X represents the levels of contact and trust with the named connections.

The thickness of the lines and the numbers on the lines indicate how many participants said they had spoken to the relevant person or organisation about preparing for work or finding a job, since they had had the right to work in the UK. AMIF partner organisations were **not** included as connections within the survey and so survey findings do not relate to the role of these organisations.

The relative size of the connection circles correlates with the average trust scores from across all respondents, according to how much they said they would trust each person or organisation to try to help them to prepare for work or find a job in Scotland (a little, a lot, or not at all). The bigger the circle, the higher the average trust score. These preliminary findings indicate that the top three people and organisations that people had spoken to about preparing for work or finding a job were Jobcentre Plus (8), friends in the same city (6) and an organisation where they had volunteered (6). The results indicate that there were relatively high levels of trust in all of these people or organisations. The roles played by friends and by volunteering in employability are explored further in the sections below.

Interim Report 8

Figure two: Network diagram
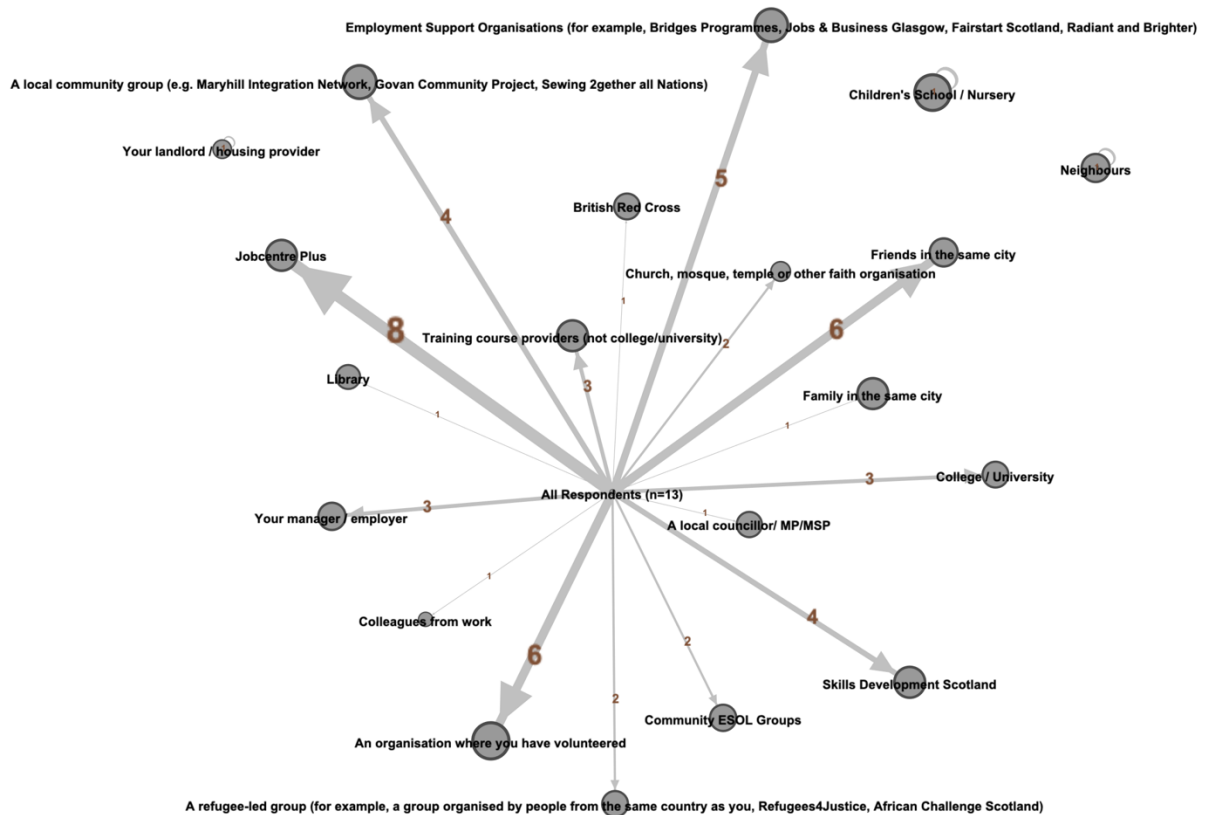
5. Employment

5.1 Experiences of the integration service

As noted in previous Interim Reports, participants mostly spoke very positively about their experiences of employability provision through the AMIF ABM3 integration services. Ali had managed to find work through Anita at Scottish Refugee Council, and was, at the time of interview, navigating the process of finding a new job.

> *"That's why I'm always trying to contact Anita [from Scottish Refugee Council], she always teaches me how to do it"* (Ali)

The many participants who praised the integration service often expressed gratitude towards individual staff with whom they had built trusting relationships. As in previous reports, it was evident that regular and consistent contact with one person seemed to foster deeper connections and more productive experiences. Liliya spoke of the many ways in which a member of staff from Bridges Programmes had helped, providing not only access to training and English language support, but also showing care:

> *"Elena also was extra welcoming and kind so she offered us to join the group and she was so kind to meet us and to tell us about it."* (Liliya)

Interim Report 8

Although these were in the minority, some participants' interactions with the integration services had been less positive. Amir explained that although he had met once with Scottish Refugee Council and had then been referred to the Bridges team for help translating his qualifications, he had not heard anything from either for several months. As a result he did not feel a strong connection with either organisation as is illustrated by the dotted lines on his pathways map at figure 3.

Shokoor, who had arrived via an Afghan resettlement scheme, felt he had largely been left to find out about employment himself. He did receive notices of job opportunities from organisations including Job Centre Plus and Bridges Programmes but did not appear to be accessing more personalised support from any formal organisation. Instead, he had relied on a friend to support him into employment. He was now self-employed as a delivery driver, but hoped to find "good office work" soon so he could use his skills from previous employment as an interpreter and prosecutor:

> Interviewer: And your work as a delivery driver how did you find that job? Who told you about this job or did you just see it and apply?
>
> Shokoor: One of my friends came here with me he started so I needed to start the job because I didn't find a good job for myself. So I said still I am finding a new job I will do the delivery.
>
> Interviewer: He was working for a takeaway or a restaurant?
>
> Shokoor: Yes, for a takeaway.
>
> Interviewer: And he told you about this job?
>
> Shokoor: Yes […] He was suggesting to me, he told you can do yourself.

In this cohort of interviewees, it was again clear that integration support is most valued when it is delivered by someone with whom beneficiaries feel they have been able to build a relationship of trust. Less personal contacts appear to be less productive in terms of people's perceptions of help they have received.

5.2 The impact of time

Many participants voiced how difficult and frustrating it has been to gain employment commensurate with their skills and experience, coming up against the challenges of translating and converting their education, qualifications, networks, and experience across borders – sometimes built up over decades. English language skills also presented barriers to finding work. Additionally, time spent waiting in the asylum process meant people were left with gaps in their CVs, furthering them from their end goal of securing work – this was often described as 'wasted time'. These factors frustrated hopes for some of returning to their careers – some interviewees were in jobs for which they were overqualified, some had committed themselves to retrain, or to further education and training courses, and others had transferred their aspirations and ambitions to their children. Paulo who had not yet secured work in the cosmetic industry, despite decades of experience, explained:

> 'My son is going to be doctor and my daughter hopefully should be a doctor, so I have a good generation coming. So why should I lose hope, if I lose hope it means that I'm

damaging another generation. If I'm damaged, which I'm not, but if I'm damaged at least I have a chance to build the other generation.' (Paulo)

Connecting with services helped to mitigate the sense of wasted time but could not always repair the gaps wrought by enforced inactivity during the asylum process, nor the barriers inherent within different systems of education and labour markets.

5.3 The impact of age

Several participants reflected that it is harder for older people who have been through the asylum process to find suitable employment. The older one arrives to the UK, the more likely it is that people have an already established career and thus it is more likely they encounter frustration transferring this career to the UK. Younger people who are earlier in their education and career journeys, seemed more able to make their way into the working world, via education, or 'less-skilled' jobs, where it was perhaps tougher for those with longer careers to have to 'start again'.

> *"At some points you feel awful to do it because you are going to start again because they didn't accept your master's, your bachelor, your experience."* (Firdaus)

Some of the older interviewees had the added complications of health issues and responsibilities such as caring for dependents which curtailed their freedom to explore work opportunities.

5.4 Volunteering as a route to employment?

In the long periods of waiting, many participants spoke of how they fill their free time with recreational activities, training courses and volunteering. Volunteering was perceived as a way to keep busy whilst also helping and connecting with people. This speaks of a sense of reciprocity and desire to give back that has been a recurring theme in the research. Participants were also motivated to volunteer as a way to build skills. In some cases this led directly to employment. Javid was offered paid work the day after he received his refugee status, becoming a manager in a community project where he had previously provided practical assistance to other asylum seekers as a volunteer.

> *"When I was granted the same place where I'm working and I was a volunteer the boss told me you are granted now, you are allowed to work, just work with me. From that time I sought to support all the asylum seekers [...] My main focus or the top focus or priority I put refugee needs to be supported through this project, this is something that I'm doing."* (Javid)

However, not everyone shared such a positive experience. Firdaus was volunteering with a number of charities and organisations, but remarked:

> *'All of them you gain some information from them but most of them you feel yourself they are using you, they are using you as a volunteer, that's it. But once you need them in the reality you are not going to find it.'* (Firdaus)

Hena's pathways map at figure three illustrates a similar situation. Hena is a woman aged 50+, who has caring responsibilities for three children. She had received significant and ongoing support from Scottish Refugee Council since arriving in Scotland. This included engaging in collective efforts to improve access to higher education for people seeking asylum in Scotland.

She is a trustee for a charity and is highly qualified and motivated. But she spoke at length of her deep frustration that she was still not able to get a paid job. Three factors, in her description, were acting as barriers: the time she had wasted in the asylum process; her age; and the limits of the experience she had been able to gain through volunteering.

The first thing is that the decision took too long to be able to live my life here […] And I have three children as well so I have to look after them[…] ten years is a long period, I was in my forties and now I am in my fifties so that makes a difference […] I have written so many applications, applied in many different places and gone for interviews as well. In a few I was told that the application was very good and the interview was very good and everything was good but I didn't have that experience that they were looking for because I never got the opportunity to do that […] I had been volunteering but that volunteering doesn't give you that much experience of the work that I am applying for. The level of my qualifications and my skills and ability I never got the chance to do volunteering at that level. (Hena)

Although Hena's pathway maps outlines many productive and positive connections, and resulting outcomes, she still felt stuck in a cycle of volunteering that had not yet resulted in her reaching her goal of paid, fulfilling employment.

Figure 2: Hena's pathway
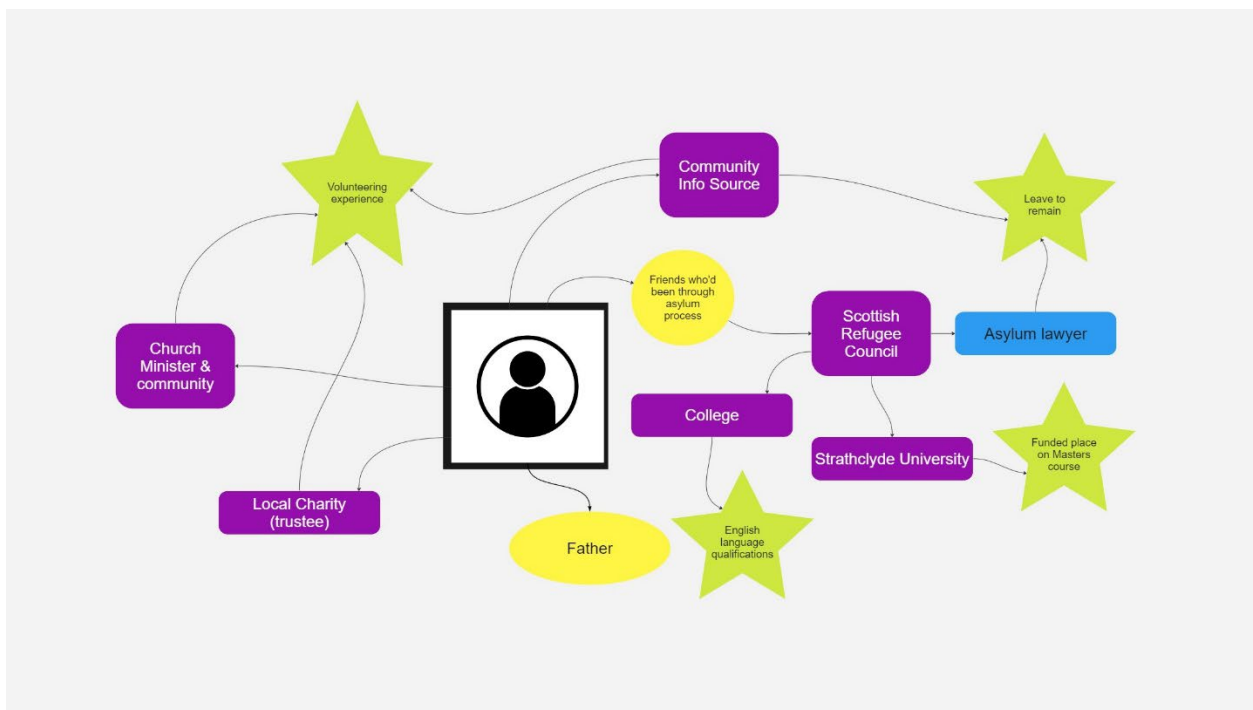
5.5 Overcoming barriers to employment – entrepreneurship?

Hena, in common with a number of other participants, felt that setting up one's own business, in her case a social enterprise, was one way to overcome some of the difficulties outlined above. This desire to start a business mirrors a wider sense of self-advocacy, and the desire and importance of taking things into one's own hands, not just in terms of employment but in many areas of life – this was widely expressed. This approach also affords people who may face

difficulty finding work due to factors such as disability and childcare the chance to exercise a greater degree of agency in their own pathways. It also presents itself as an aspirational yet pragmatic move to circumnavigate structural barriers and disappointments encountered in UK systems.

6. The role of housing in employment pathways

These findings are presented in a context where availability of social housing constrains people's choices and pathways in ways that are not unique to refugees (see also Interim Report 7). While our initial hypothesis was that people living in temporary housing would experience higher barriers to employability, we found less evidence than expected that this was the case.

Where housing was unsuitable or precarious, there was evidence that this could have a negative impact on people's sense of belonging and their ability to progress in other areas. This does not mean that people's experiences in temporary types of accommodation were uniformly negative. For some participants, life in asylum hotels (asylum route refugees) or on-board cruise ships (Ukrainian refugees) had offered opportunities to meet and share experiences with people who had become good friends or who had helped them to connect with other useful organisations and people.

> *"so when we were on the cruise ship we were friends with a guy, he was studying at the Bridges and he like told us about this programme and we also applied for it as my husband was interested in this type of education. And I also went with him to study"* (Liliya)

However, even for the many people who were determined to move on towards different personal goals, living in a temporary home and waiting for the final 'forever' home to be identified was a constant pressure. Two families were still living in Home Office-assigned accommodation but knew they could not stay there in the long term although they would have preferred for this to be possible:

> *"It is frustrating, you know what makes it frustrating is you are not settled, you are expecting to move any moment […] every day we see a post coming we say, oh, this could be the eviction letter, this could be the eviction letter, this could be, you know. So you don't feel settled, you see what I mean."* (Paulo)

> *"this accommodation is very suitable and very comfortable for us, we got used to it in this area. We don't like the change the area but that's out of our hands […] you get refugee status you have to leave this accommodation […] I'm wondering about the accommodation to give me a chance to get a comfortable accommodation is the thing that I'm always thinking about, just for my daughter not for me and my husband."* (Julie)

When people were finally able to move on to more permanent housing, being near to work and educational opportunities was an important factor to helping people feel that this home was sustainable and suitable. Akif explained that, for him, his children being enrolled at and happy in a local school was the main thing that made him want to stay in his current area:

> *Interviewer: And are you quite happy in the area in Castlemilk, is that an area you are happy with?*

Interim Report 8

Akif: Yes, because for me more important my family, my children study near here at Kings Park School, yes, my children are happy I am happy, no problem.

Javid spoke of a multitude of factors linked to work, education and to his wife's ability to make new connections that influenced his desire to stay in the G53 area. He worked nearby, and Glasgow Clyde college was a short bus ride away. He calculated that between his work, dropping children at school, and his wife going to college, the area offered good transport connections as well as the potential to meet other families from Afghanistan:

> *There are some Afghan families here sometimes that I try to link my family with those families, especially my wife that she can also be integrated.*

Choosing housing, where choice was genuinely available, was shaped not only with existing connections and commitments. People also were influenced by their perceptions of areas' connectivity, understood both in terms of available public transport links and the potential for meeting others with whom people felt confident to build relationships.

7. The role of friendship in employment pathways

Friendship played both an emotional and functional role in people's lives. Amir, who felt less engaged than some other participants in formal integration support services, relied on friends and their extended networks to plan for his future. At the time of interview, he was arranging to take over a business. He had been introduced to the lawyer managing the handover by a friend from college but it was the fact that the lawyer's secretary was, like him, Iranian that had facilitated the introduction.

> *'Yes, I had a friend who was studying in the college and at the same time he was working with this guy so this is how I was introduced to this person… […] so he actually introduced the lawyer to me which is kind of doing the paperwork for the business. But actually the secretary who works there is Iranian so that's why he has been introduced to this lawyer.'*

Amir also spoke warmly of support and help he had received through his volunteering role at a Foodbank and from his church, but it was his friends and their connections that had brokered his productive connection to his future business.

Figure 3: Amir's pathway
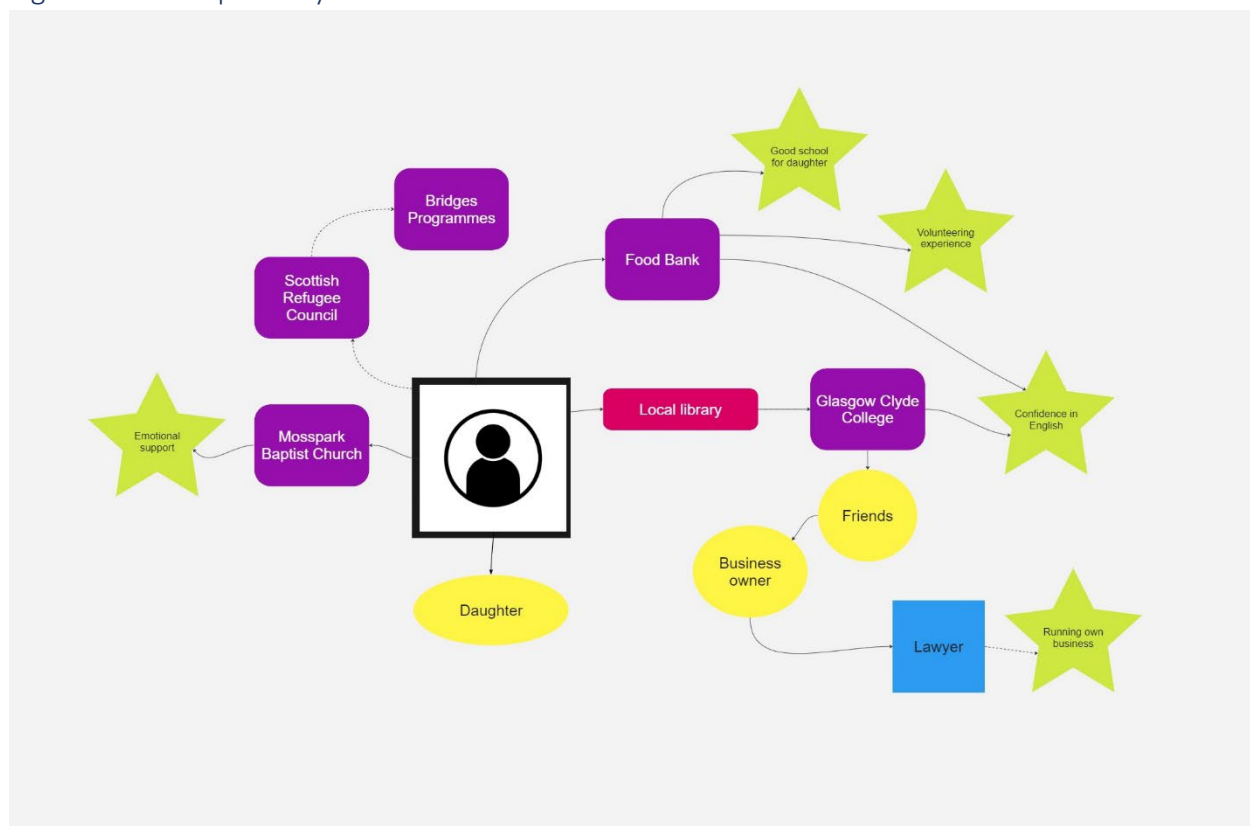
Place, as in a physical space, emerged as a significant facilitator for friendships to occur.

> *'we had all the different dances and things, like Scottish dance and then Ukrainian dance and then Polish dance, I feel like, wow, people have a good culture. And then still you*

Interim Report 8

feel good about other people around them, it's good connection so I feel like I want to be joining this kind of thing more often, if it was there it would be great'. (Tariq)

Important spaces 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. Although it was common that participants would mention the significance of an emotionally supportive friendship, it was also common for people to highlight sporadic positive connections, including with neighbours or even strangers. Relatedly, many participants framed Glasgow as a welcoming or friendly place, usually with reference to having stayed in other parts of the UK.

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

'I remember, I used to tell my mum and everybody I didn't feel like I'm a foreigner here, especially in Glasgow, not even for a day. You know, it meant a lot for me because I was alone there, I was a foreigner, I was not … I mean, I don't know how to explain it but it was very important.' (Yasmin)

While not directly related to employability, it was clear that positive relationships framed people's lives and – in ways similar to housing- were an important factor in people's feelings of belonging, acceptance and settlement.

Interim Report 8

8. Information

Echoing previous interim reports, this phase of the research highlights the pivotal role social connections have in enabling (or in some cases constraining) people's access to a diverse range of information. The data provides further understanding of: *who* the key information providers are; *what* type of information they provide; *when*, and *where* this information is provided; and of the *impact* of this information on peoples' pathways to socio-economic inclusion.

For example, our participants described the role friends, other refugees, trusted workers from support organisations, and more established people from the same country of origin play in the provision of information. Friends emerged as pivotal in the transmission of information that allowed people to navigate new places and systems. As Silvan stated,

> *'Once you know someone you can meet someone else who can tell you how the system works, how the country works and what's the best places to stay.'* (Silvan)

The information provided by AMIF partner organisations and other service providers was described as having a key functional role in:

i.   the accomplishment of a specific outcome (e.g. to sort out Universal Credit);
ii.   providing links to other social connections (referrals or signposting), and
iii.   in highlighting potential opportunities (e.g. in relation to jobs, participants emphasised the email lists sent by the Bridges Programme and SRC).

In many cases, this provision of information was experienced in both affective and functional terms. From our interviewees' narratives this happens when the provision of information is understood as a reciprocal act of care, particularly among friends. Funke, for instance, emphasised the support that she has received from a close friend that she met through her son's school. Her friend is from a South American country, Funke is from an African country. They don't speak the same language, but they are close friends and support each other with childcare but also *'mentally, physically, spiritually anyhow we can'.* Including the transmission of information:

> *'She doesn't have anyone here and again, you know, she might have information that I don't know, and I might have information. So, we share it together.'* (Funke)

The timing of the transmission of information emerged as a key theme in the analysis. Most people recall receiving a huge amount of information at the start of the asylum process, although in many cases scattered and from multiple sources. Some participants shed light on how access to information allowed them to map the places, people and processes they needed to know of during those early days. As Maryam stated, *'I started asking people and they showed me the way'.* Jorge further emphasised the functional role information plays in this:

> *"It was like having a new map, we had the map but we didn't know where to walk, they told us where to go and that."* (Jorge)

As in previous research activities, project partners were identified as key facilitators of this information mapping:

> *"SRC were my route map''* (Akif)

Interim Report 8

Participants also described the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as search engines (e.g. Google) and social media in finding a college or other training opportunities to support them on their pathway to employment, among other information. Funke, for instance, describes how she used the internet to find about colleges and courses:

> *'I just searched for college in Glasgow, so I look for the distance, I didn't want to go to one that was really far (…) Google is really [helpful], anything you want to know just ask.'* (Funke)

Several participants associated the use of ICTs with a sense of agency in being able to find the information themselves.

Conclusion

The rich data from this set of interviews confirms and extends our understanding of the role social connections play in pathways to social and economic inclusion. In the face of structural and societal barriers which can frustrate highly educated and skilled people from achieving their employment aspirations, friendship plays a pivotal role in finding alternative routes to employment, including self-employment. Service providers, including employment support organisations, play a practical but also an emotional or 'affective' role. Consistent and personalised support from one person in an organisation can be the difference between keeping steady along a desired career pathway and giving up hope. Further, the findings highlight the importance of considering how people's personal and familial situations, including their stage in the settlement process, and in their own life cycle affect their opportunities and pragmatic aspirations for employment in the UK.

As a holistic integration service committed to supporting people to pursue their own aspirations for integrating into Scotland, we ask our AMIF partners to consider the following questions to help shape our second round of interviews with this same sample in October:

1. *Which of the themes raised in this interim report would you like to know more about?*
2. *Are there any comparators (for example age, gender, housing situation, neighbourhoods, faith) that you would like us to explore more in the next round of interviews?*
3. *What questions or contexts would be most useful for you in furthering your understanding of what works in terms of supporting people into employment or wider socio-economic inclusion?*