Queen Margaret University
INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT

The Role of Social Connections in Refugees' Pathways to Social and Economic Inclusion

Research Report

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1. Introduction

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 partners who deliver specialist services: Scottish Refugee Council (integration planning), Workers Educational Association (English language assessment and learning) and Bridges Programmes (employability support). The practice partners have engaged with the research team to facilitate data collection and to feed into the ongoing project development to enable mutual learning. The research component of the ABM3 project has explored the following research questions:

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

Social connections have long been identified as critical to all domains of integration[1]. Across all partner interventions, practitioners recognise that building social relationships is critical to the integration process. The Indicators of Integration Framework, around which the AMIF-funded Integration Service has built its interventions, uses the categories of bonds, bridges and links to distinguish between different types of connections[2]. 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 framework recognises that integration is a process, not a set of pre-defined outcomes, that is influenced by time and by local contexts[3]. Connections too 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 over time. Categorising connections as being either bonds, bridges or links risks failing to recognise this fluidity and the resulting overlaps between categories. Therefore, we chose 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 certain tangible outcomes (employment, housing, improved health) varies from person to person and changes over time.

[1] Ager, A. and Strang, A . (2008) 'Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework' Journal of Refugee Studies Volume 21 (2), pp.166–191
[2] Ndofor-Tah, C, Strang, A., Phillimore, J., Morrice, L., Michael, L., Wood, P. and Simmons, J. (2019). Home Office Indicators of Integration Framework 2019: third edition.
[3] See footnote 1.

2. Summary of activities

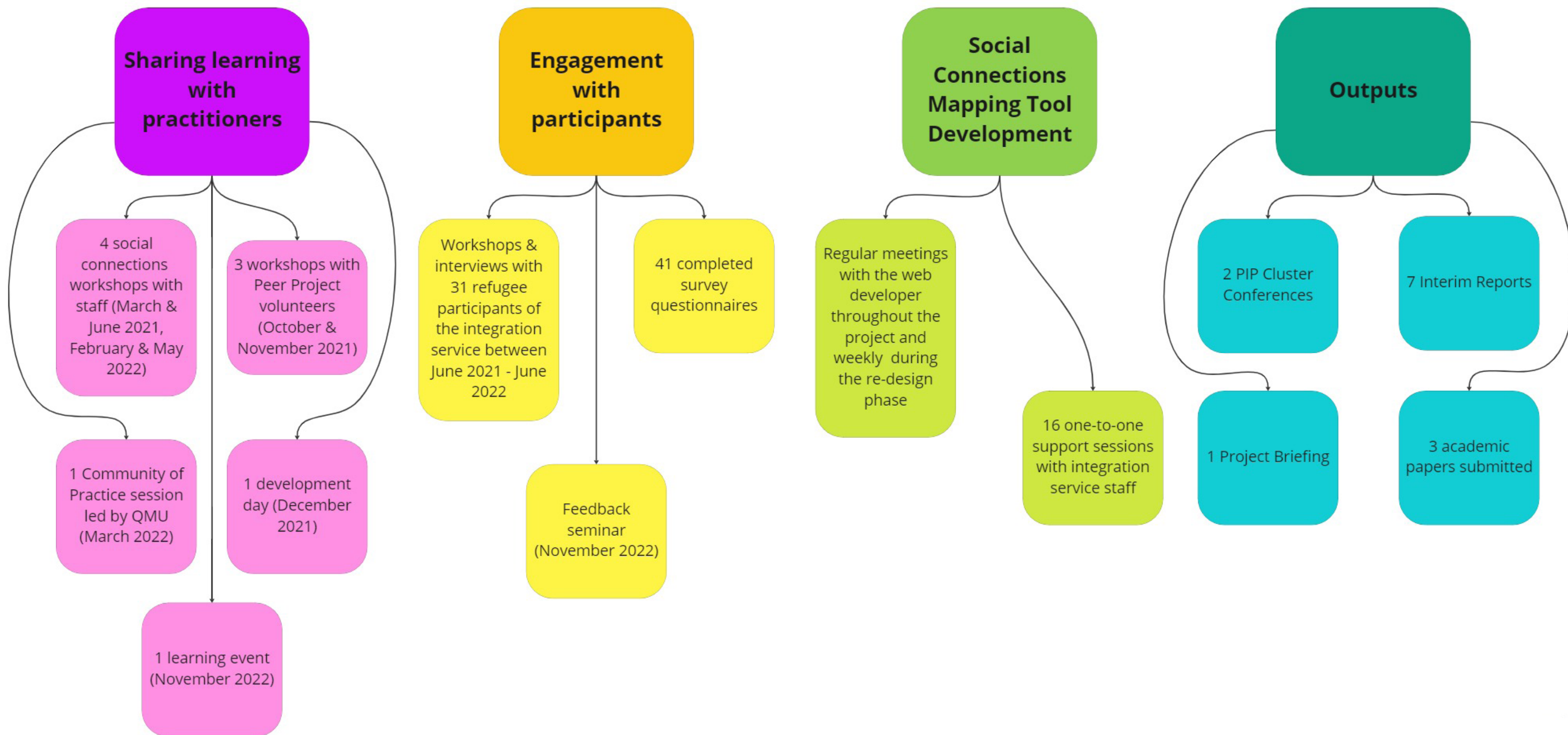

Figure 1: Map showing summary of activities and outputs

3. Connections Mapping Methodology

Queen Margaret University's involvement in the project was built around testing, refining and embedding the Institute's social connections mapping tool (SCMT) methodology[4]. This tool has been developed through many years of work with displaced people living in the UK and post-conflict settings outside Europe. It offers researchers and practitioners the opportunity to understand not just the quantity but the qualities of relationships that are important to refugees. The SCMT methodology includes qualitative participatory workshops which facilitate the design of a quantitative survey. While the SCMT was critical to the earlier research activities carried out, and to the analysis of our findings, we used additional methods to expand data collection and ensure the relevance of research activities to service delivery.

3.1 Methodological development and practice-research engagement

Throughout the project, we have worked closely with practitioners from across the service. Our ambition was to embed the SCMT into the integration planning process, with the dual aims of enhancing practice and gathering research data. The original research design involved supporting Integration Advisers to encourage their clients to complete social connections surveys then use these to facilitate conversations about social connections as part of the personal integration planning process. Despite enthusiasm and support from service managers, the number of surveys completed through advisers remained very low. This was influenced by service pressures, including those linked to the arrival of people fleeing the war in Ukraine and resettled Afghan nationals. Additionally, systematic barriers impeded the more holistic conversations that practitioners aspired to have with service beneficiaries:

> ***"People need ambition and willingness to pursue opportunities, and this is often not lacking for our clients – however, they face systematic and institutional discrimination."***
> (Caseworker)

Staff frequently explained that they did not have the time required to explore with beneficiaries their aspirations and, by extension their wider social worlds. In this pressured environment, where service providers and refugees are often focused on achieving essential goals such as safe housing and financial support, it became clear that the research design needed to be adapted. Practitioner feedback led us to

[4] A user's guide is available at: Strang, A., O'Brien, O., Vidal, N., and Dakessian, A (2019) Participatory Assessment Tool for Mapping Social Connections: A Users' Guide

further contextualise the survey questions to focus on employment and housing:

> ***"It is easier to capture conversations if you're focusing on one area [of integration]. When you're discussing different areas it can be harder to hone in on social connections."***
> (Manager)

Nonetheless, despite re-design of the survey, participation rates remained low compared to the relative ease with which we were able to recruit participants for interviews and workshops. This has led us to reflect that researching social connections works best when the research activities themselves enable some level of dialogue and can be a platform for connections to be made. Less personal, remote research tools such as an online survey seemed less fitting for work that itself focuses on the meaning and function of human connections. Despite the challenges, the learnings from this project have been valuable to keep improving the SCMT and to identify possible ways to embed it in service provision.

Another methodological consideration that shaped the project was our decision to create spaces where practitioners could reflect on service delivery throughout the project, rather than solely sharing findings at the end. To achieve this, we drew inspiration from the project title to develop individual *pathway* maps that illustrate how connections interact and the ways in that they can lead to various tangible and less concrete outcomes. These pathway maps were shared with practitioners through engagement activities including the project's Community of Practice. Their feedback was that this way of representing research findings resonated with practitioners' understandings of integration and of their own work. Scottish Refugee Council staff particularly commented on how the maps illuminated tipping points - key individuals and organisations that had opened doors to lots of other connections. The maps also highlighted that informal routes, for example community English classes, can open up unexpected pathways to economic and social outcomes, compared to more formal routes. Comparing people's maps illustrated that every person's pathways to inclusion are different, reinforcing for practitioners the value of having one-to-one discussions with beneficiaries as part of the integration planning process.

One such pathways map, and a key to interpret it, is reproduced in Figure 2. This is drawn from an interview with a man in his forties, Eugene, who was living alone in Glasgow while seeking family reunion with family members overseas[5]. Red connections, representing statutory services, are numerous in Eugene's pathways map as he recounted positive experiences throughout the asylum process as well as with his GP. Eugene also highlighted the importance of his faith

[5] Names of all research participants have been anonymised throughout this report and other research outputs.

community, accessed through the Glasgow Central Mosque, and the individuals who comprised this, represented in yellow. Purple connections are civil society organisations, notably Integration Service partners. While Eugene had broadly been able to connect with people and organisations he wished to engage with, other maps used dotted connector lines to signify connections that people were unable to create; and red dotted lines for connections that were experienced negatively.

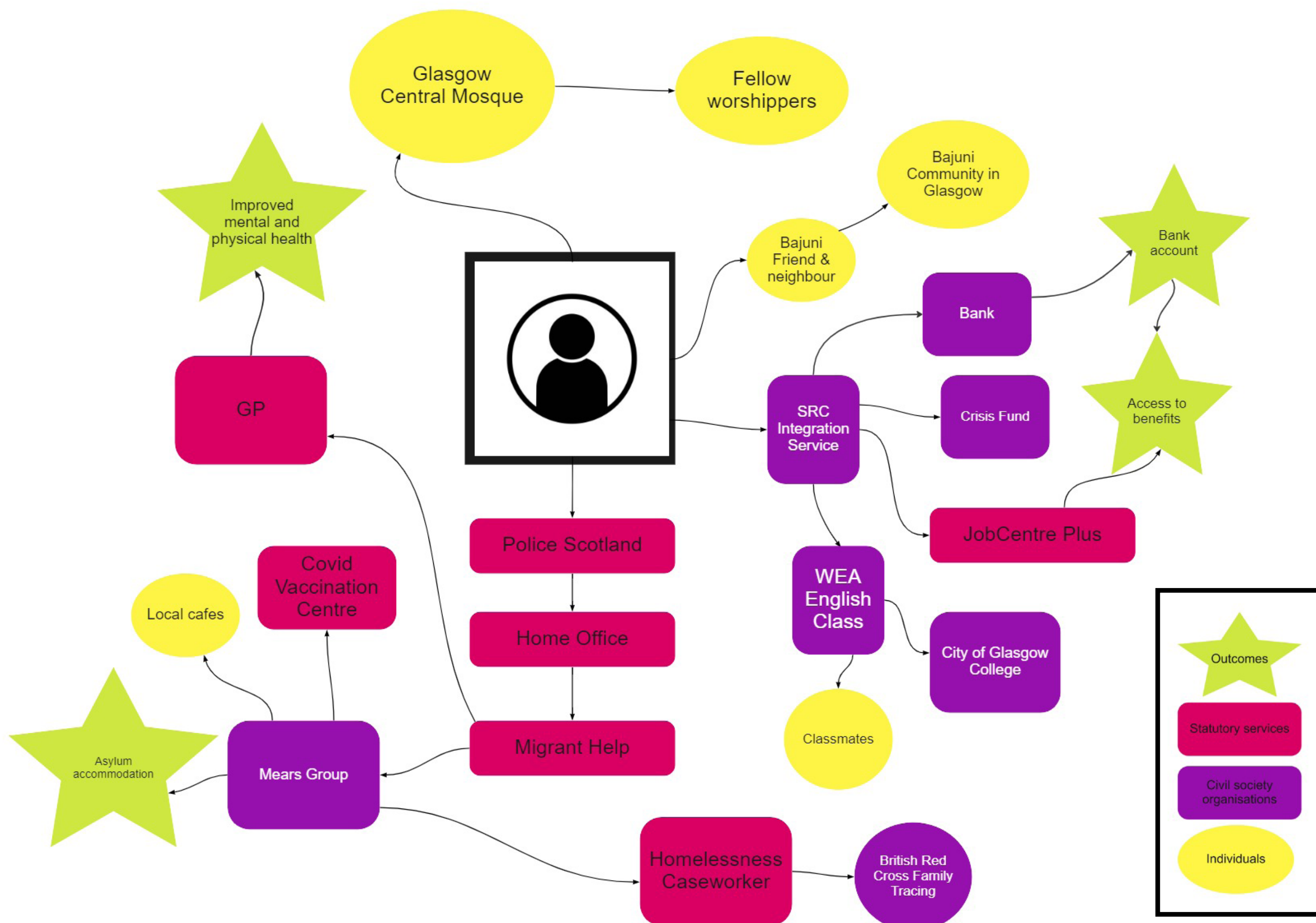

Figure 2: Pathways map, individual interview participant (Eugene)

3.2 Social Connections Mapping Tool – participative workshops

The SCMT methodology incorporates workshops which are designed to elicit the people and organisations to whom refugees living in Scotland could turn if they experienced problems in their lives. During three workshops in June 2021, refugee participants were

invited to discuss three hypothetical scenarios which were explored sequentially and framed as follows - to whom would you or someone in your community speak or go to for help if:

- They had to move home?
- They wanted to make friends in a new area?
- They were looking for work?

The resulting connections were mapped onto a virtual or physical flowchart as shown in Figure 2.

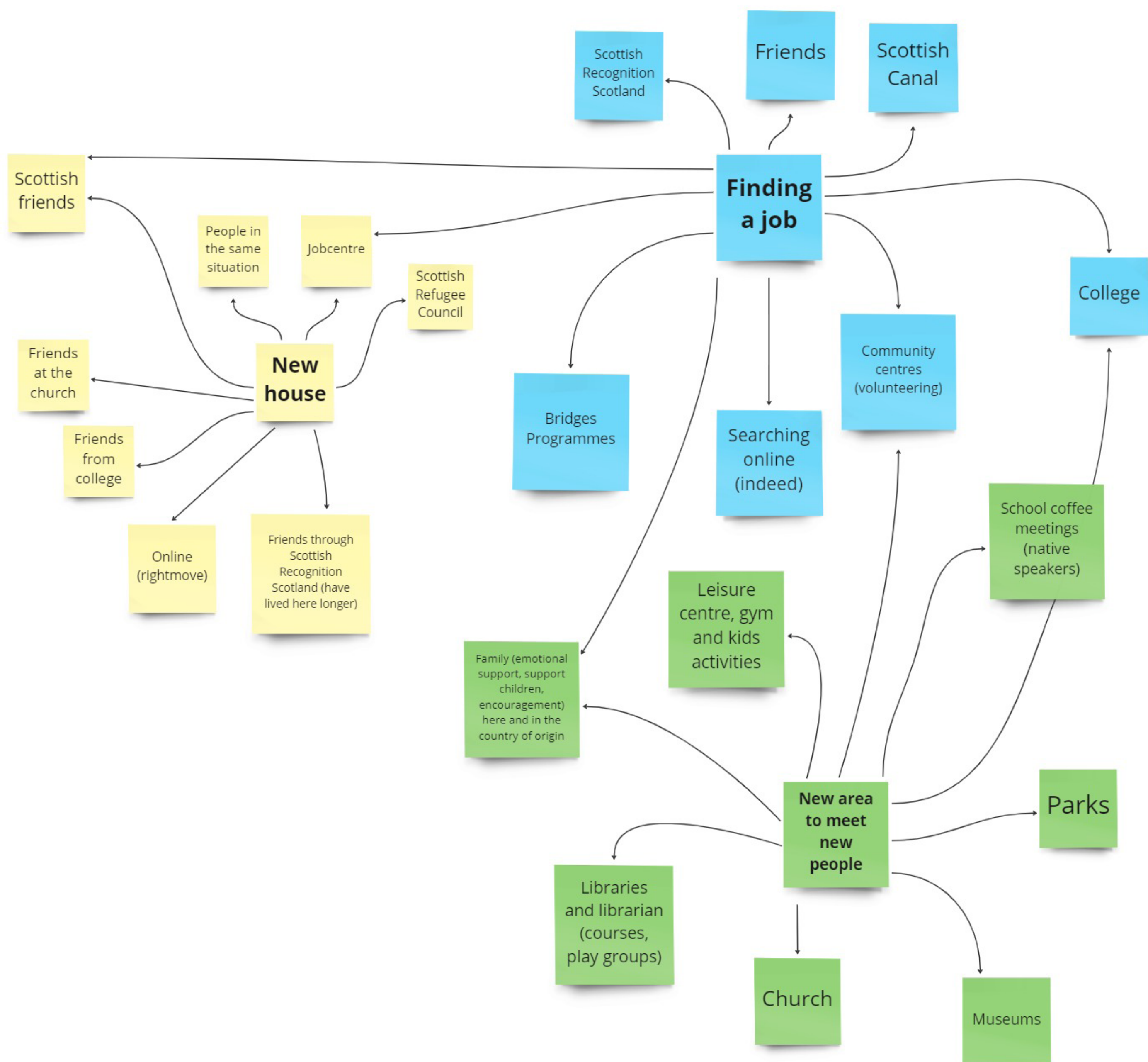

Figure 3: Connections map, beneficiary workshop June 2021

The mapping exercise enabled discussions about how they had made each connection and the role each individual or organisation played in people's lives. The research team also probed for second-level connections – whom participants might approach for help if the first connection they approach cannot resolve the problem.

3.3 Social Connections Mapping Tool - online survey

The connections identified by refugees who took part in the participatory workshops were distilled into a list of those deemed most important to them. This was shared with project practitioners, checked for accuracy and coherence, and then used to populate the online survey with a list of connections. The original version of the survey asked respondents, for each connection:

- Have you had contact with this person or organisation in the last six months?
- How much do you trust this person or organisation to help you?
- Have you had a chance to offer help or support to this person or organisation?

The survey is designed to generate individual and group maps of connections selected by the participants, with colour coding to identify levels of contact, trust and reciprocity. Initial versions of the map used colour codes to show connections that: had been recently contacted by participants (blue); that enabled refugees to offer some level of reciprocal help (yellow); and that participants trusted a lot (green). On suggestion of advisers, this was later extended to also show connections that respondents did not trust at all (outlined in red).

Intensive discussion with partners throughout the project has been vital for the further development the survey. Following feedback from beneficiaries and practitioners, the research team procured a new web developer to improve the survey usability and relevance[6]. Over a period of several months, the survey was moved to a new, more reliable platform that enabled substantial changes to the survey tool (see Figure 5). All the changes were implemented alongside continued training and support for practitioners who were encouraged to use the survey as a tool to support integration planning. The web developer also created guidance videos to improve the user-friendliness of the tool for researchers and service providers.

[6]The web developer can be contacted at https://harrygordon.co.uk/

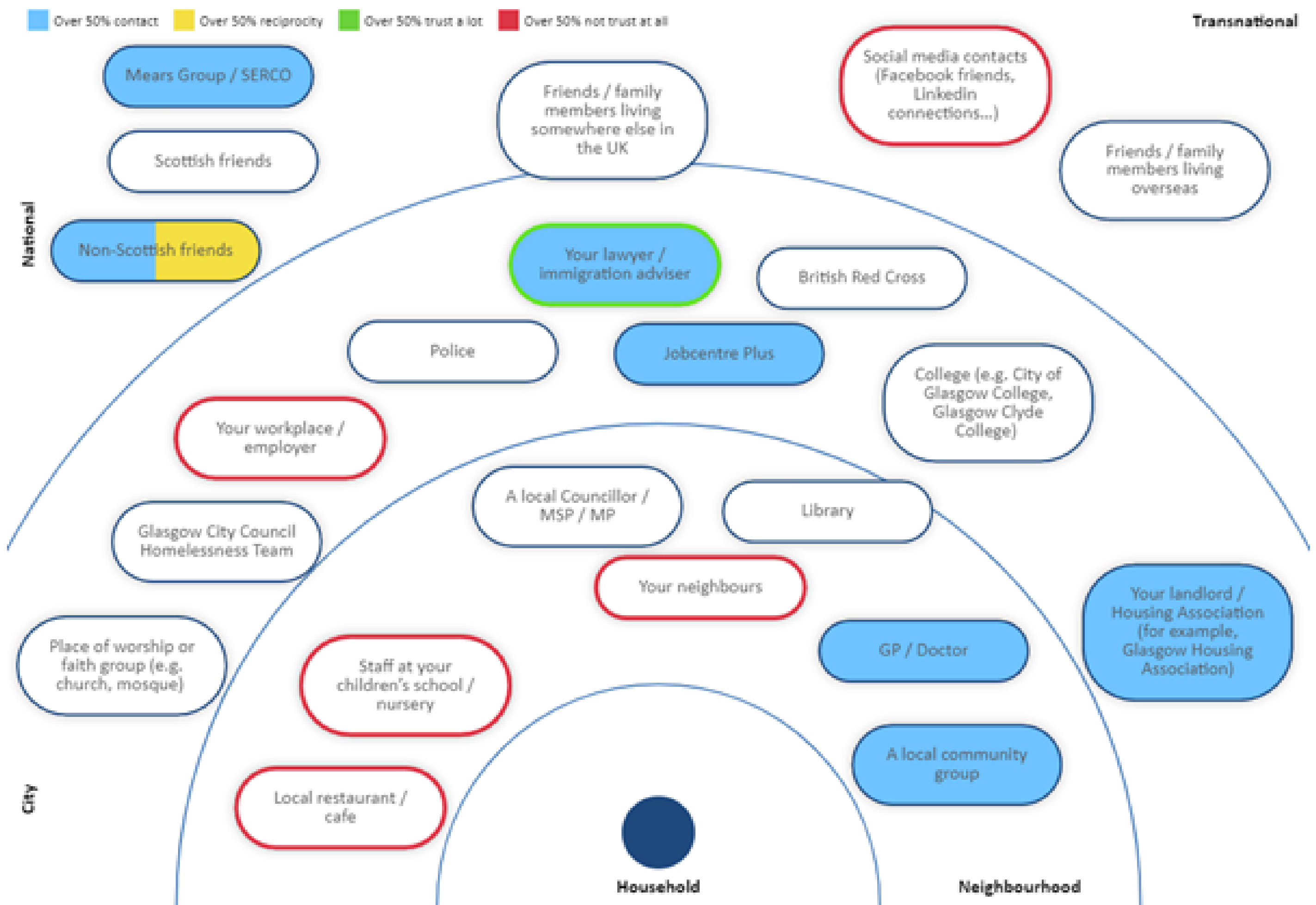

Figure 4: Group map (people supported by Integration Advisers)

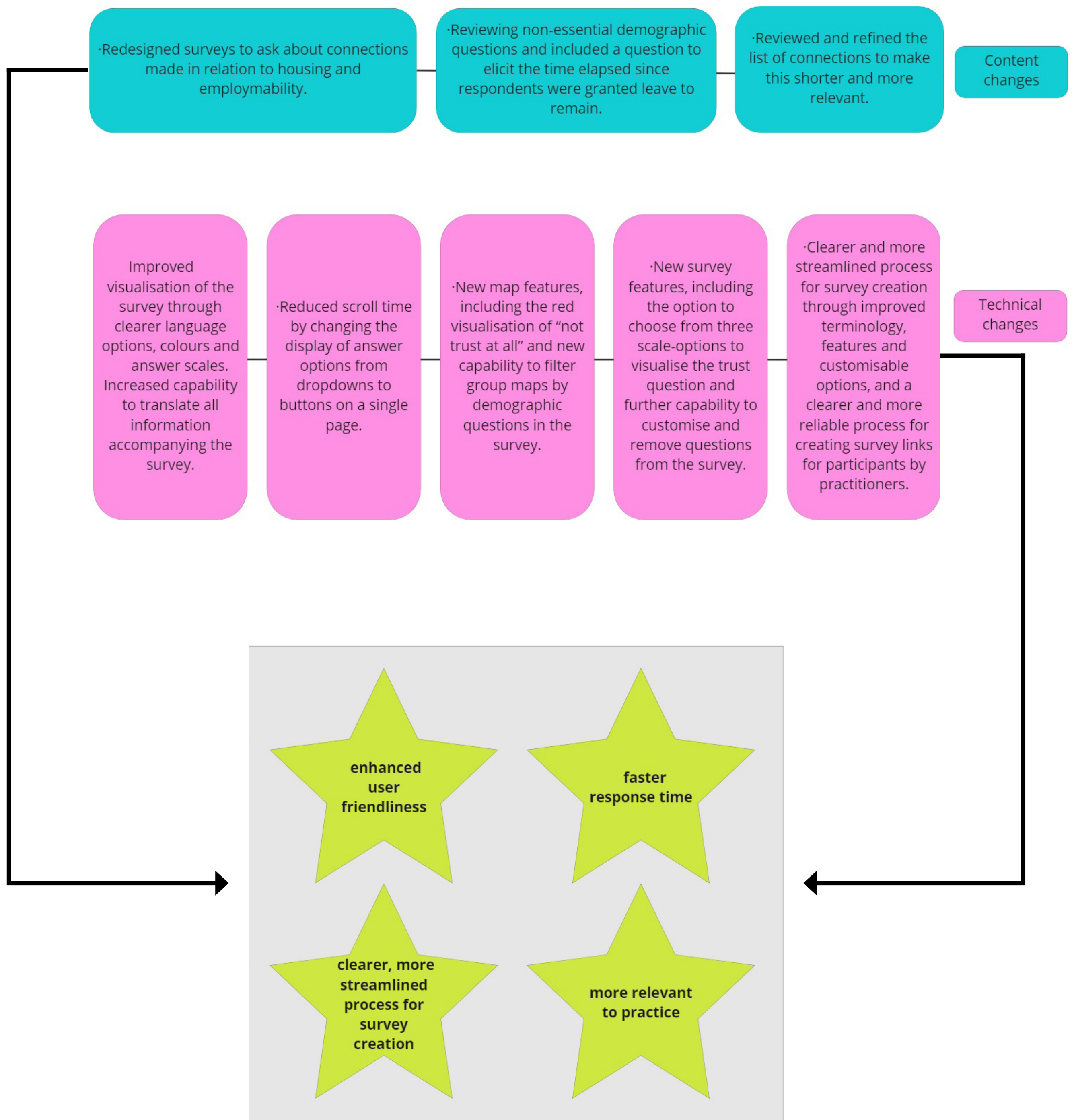

Figure : SCMT online survey - summary of changes

3.4 Bullseye Mapping

Despite initial enthusiasm, practitioners made only limited use of the online survey element of the Social Connections Mapping Tool, and few beneficiaries completed responses without input from the research team. This led us to utilise in-depth semi-structured individual interviews and workshops using different visual methods. We built upon methods used in previous research[7] to adapt a bullseye mapping exercise for identifying the people and organisations that had been important to refugees' lives in Scotland, and to facilitate discussions on the functions and meanings of these connections.

During the data collection, participants were invited to reflect on the question: "what people and organisations have been important to you in your life in Scotland?". The named connections were added to a bullseye board using Miro Mind Mapping Tool (see Figure 6), or in the case of face-to-face data collection, on A3 sheets using post-it notes. The researchers then asked how and why named people and organisations had been helpful, how they had made these connections and whether there were organisations or people with whom they still wanted to connect but had not yet been able to do so. Participants were also asked to identify which of the connections had been most important

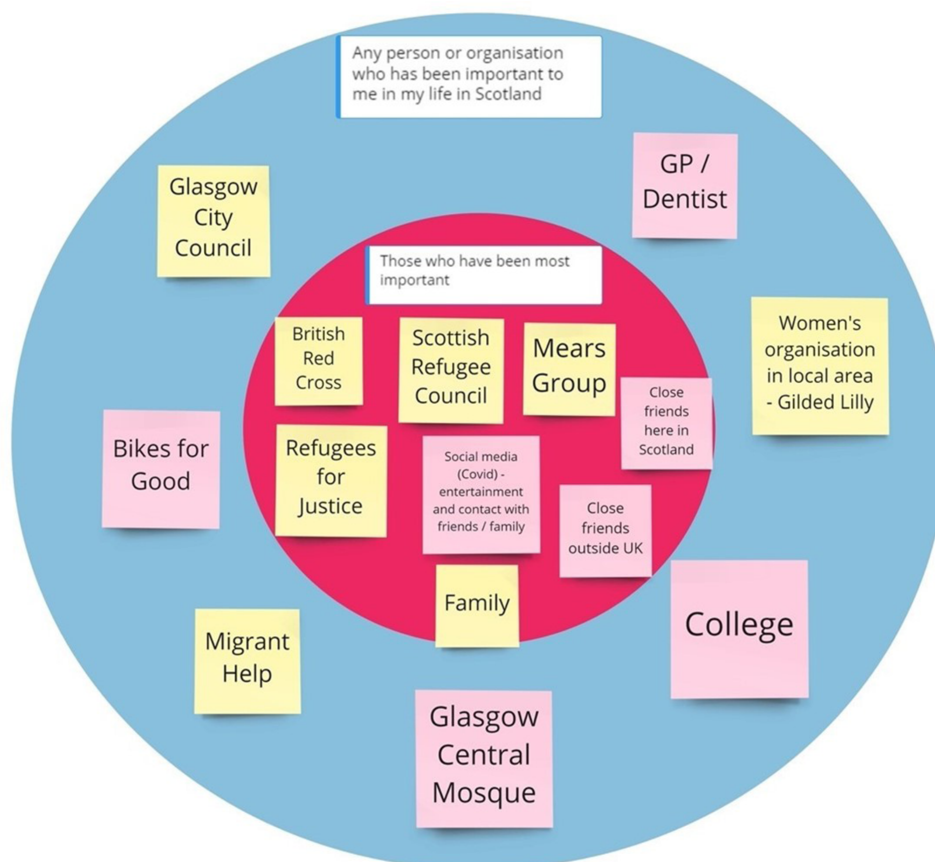

Figure 6: Bullseye map SRC Workshop 1, June 2021

[7] Pittaway, E., Bartolomei, L. & Doney, G. (2015) 'The Glue that Binds: an exploration of the way resettled refugee communities define and experience social capital' Community Development Journal Vol 51 (3), 401 - 418.

to them. Connections deemed most important were moved from the (blue) outer circle to the (red) inner circle of the bullseye. As a visual tool, the bullseye maps were used to facilitate memory and discussion during workshops.

1.5 Data analysis

The interviews and workshops were audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The research team members first individually coded a selection of the transcripts, before comparing codes to agree a shared coding framework used to code all transcripts with the aid of Dedoose software. Additionally, the researchers counted all 'important' and 'most important' connections included in 13 bullseye maps to inform directions for qualitative coding. These counted connections from 13 bullseye maps were then distilled into broad categories – for example, named charities that offer to support to refugees were counted as 'refugee-supporting organisations'. Following initial analysis of the findings, the research team organised a learning event to gather reflections from partner organisation staff, and to identify gaps and directions for further research. The learning event was comprised of small group discussions on findings, and a panel discussion on the future of integration in Scotland. Additionally, the researchers organised a small workshop to further sense-check findings with research participants.

4. Findings

In the following sections we outline our research findings. Our aim was to explore and understand the role of social connections in integration, and to answer two research questions:

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

In exploring these questions, the research team hoped to share tools and learning that would help partners to reach their operational goal of assisting refugees to build productive social connections to support their pathways to social and economic inclusion.

4.1 Forms of social connections

This initial analysis of bullseye maps revealed that the Integration Service partners (labelled as 'project partners') and other community-based organisations (labelled as 'other refugee supporting organisations') ranked highest in terms of their importance to refugees' lives in Scotland (see Figure 7):

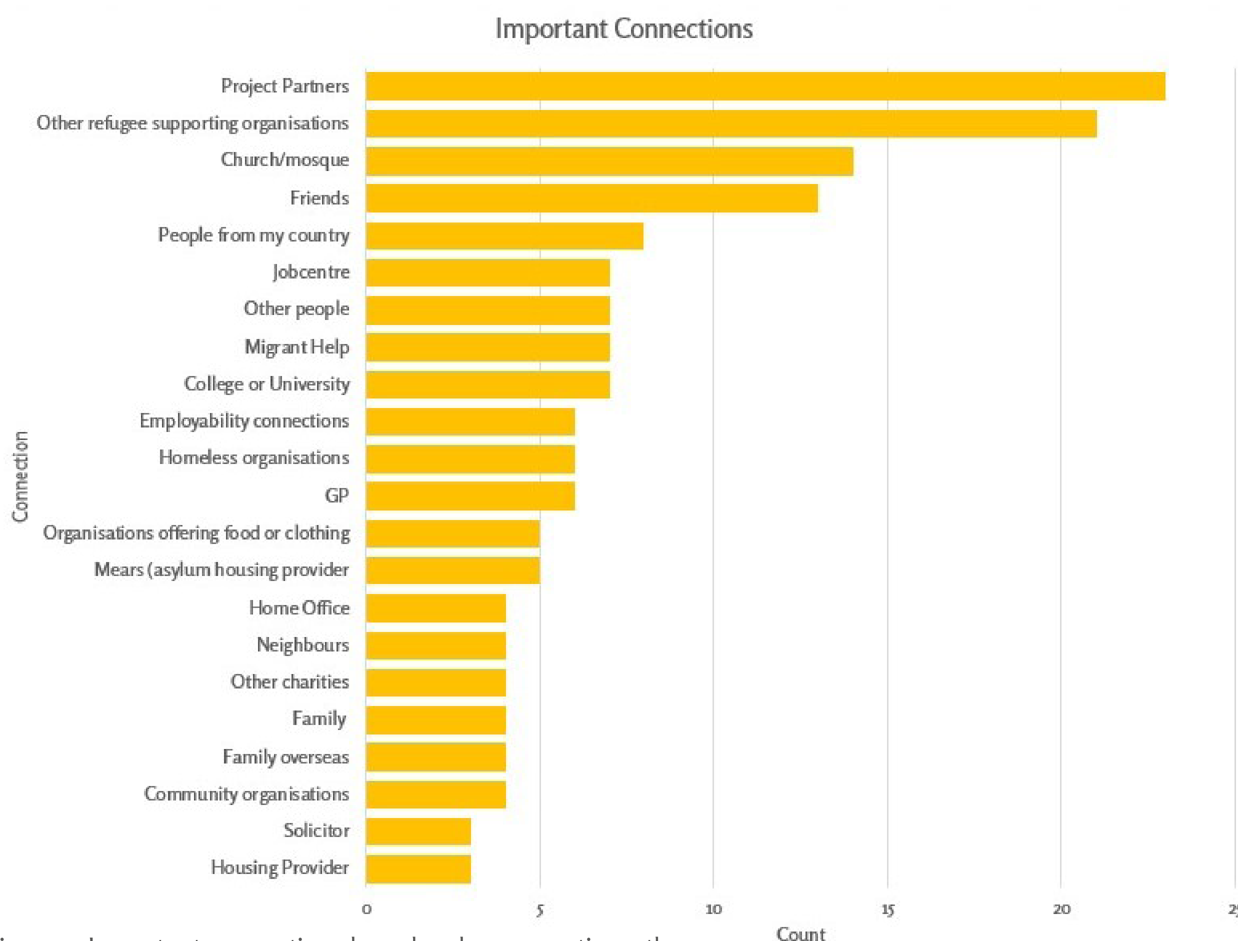

Figure 7: Important connections based on how many times these came up in bullseye conversations

When asked about the *most important* connections, Integration Service partners still ranked the highest. These organisations were not only mentioned most often, but were also frequently cited first when participants were asked to name organisations or people that had been important to them. However, several participants said that all connections had been equally valuable to them, which explains the discrepancy in counts presented in Figure 7 and 8.

> ***"All of them have been equally important. All of them, inside me all of them, I cannot value more than another one because they have support me in different ways."***
> (Diego, interview participant)

This echoes the findings outlined in previous interim reports, where project partners were praised for provision of English learning opportunities and associated improvements in understanding and confidence (Interim Report 3), for their assistance with employability and supporting people into employment

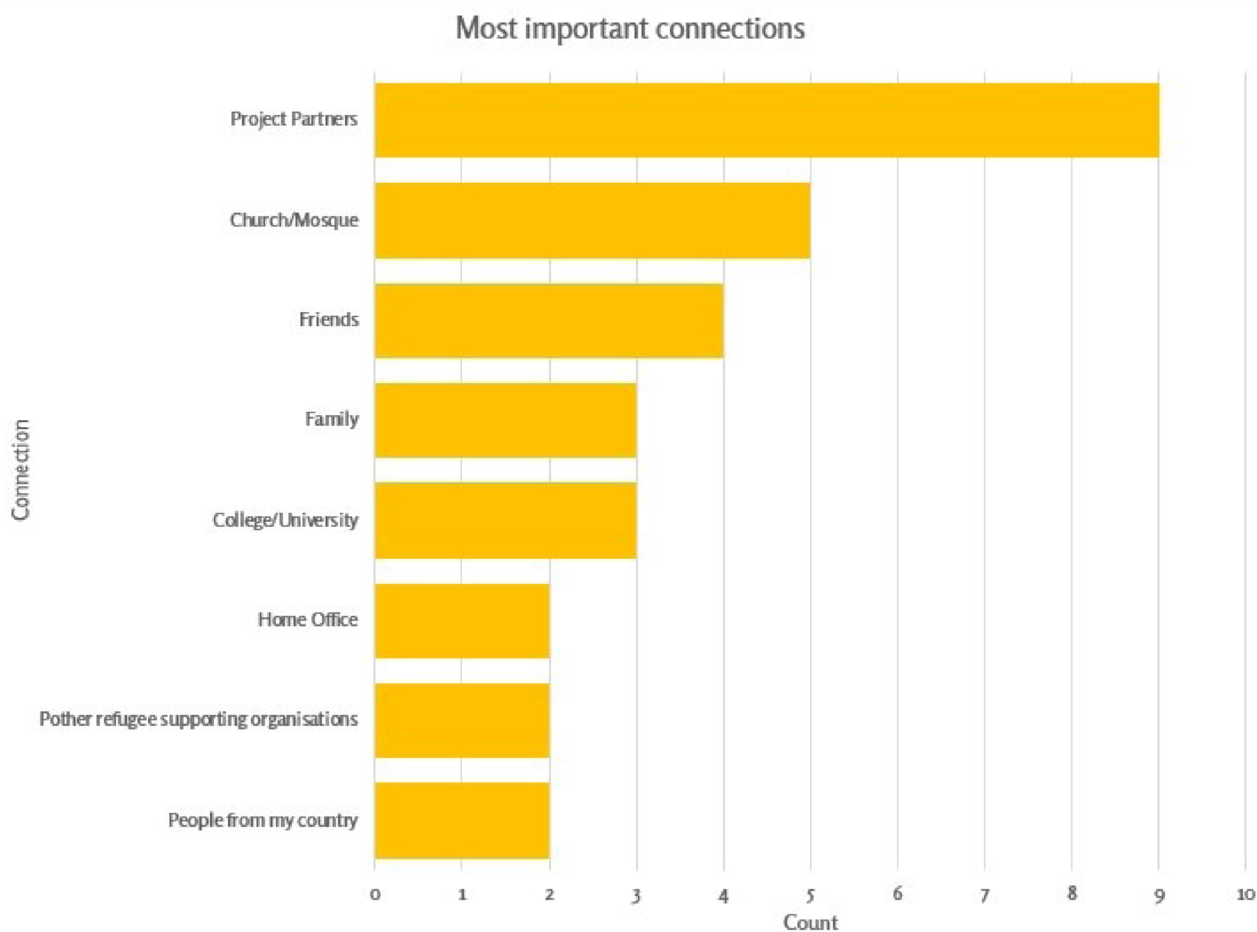

Figure 8: Most important connections based on which connections were stated as being the most important

opportunities (Interim Reports 1 & 5) and work around enabling access to sustainable settled housing (Interim Report 7). Although these connections are counted as being with organisations, many participants described their connection in terms of a relationships with a named worker. The impact of these personally felt connections is outlined in more detail in section 4.3.

Other important connections that repeatedly emerged in our analysis were faith-based groups such as church and mosque, and friends. Friendships had formed at a variety of junctures. Some people had strong connections with friends living locally but whom they had known since before arriving in the UK. Others had made friends with those they perceived to be local Scots in pubs, through shared activities or being neighbours; while at the same time maintaining positive contacts with other refugees or more settled residents of the same nationality. Some participants spoke of actively avoiding making close connections with people from the same nationality or ethnicity as they feared gossip or judgment. Personal circumstances, including family composition, gender, language level and immigration status, conditioned the connections individuals could develop. The intersection of some of these factors was expressed by Hatice who explained that her situation as a mother of young children combined with her shyness and lack of confidence in English, meant that she relied on her husband and children, and did not have many connections outside of

"I couldn't speak a lot, I am shy and I have three sons and housework...my husband has a lot of friends..."
(Hatice, workshop participant)

Hatice and her husband had however, been able to meet people and participate in cultural activities as poets and artists through a Church-based community organisation. This demonstrates how, even when participants faced barriers to connecting due to language, time or confidence, they had nonetheless found opportunities to connect with others through shared interests.

In summary, various people and organisations had played some role in the participants' lives in Scotland. Some connections assisted at a specific time: at the point of arrival in Scotland, during the asylum process or in the transition period after participants were recognised as refugees. Others offered longer term support, anchoring people to new localities and social contexts. When and why certain people and organisations are felt to be helpful depends on context: the stage people are at in their pathways, where they are living and what their aspirations are (finding a job, a place to live, reuniting with family, learning English). With this in mind, in the next section we explore the different functional roles played by key social connections.

4.2 Function of social connections

Many functions emerged as being characteristic of social connections that people deemed important to their lives. There was often significant overlap between these functions, with the most helpful and important of connections often covering several if not all of them. We focus here on four of the functions that emerged most strongly from the data analysis.

4.2.1 Access to information

During the panel discussion on the future of integration in Scotland, held as part of our partner learning event, one panelist challenged the assumption that integration is always experienced positively, describing it instead as a "process of unbecoming", whereby people feel obliged to lose some or all of their previous identities in an attempt to integrate[8]. Some of our participants also highlighted this; for people who have been forced to flee and leave behind previous careers, homes and family members, becoming a refugee can make people feel as though they are starting again from zero:

> ***"I see myself just beginning my life, second life after I move to UK. It's a clean notebook that I'm just writing my own things."***
> (Rebwar, workshop participant)

In this context, connections that enabled people to acquire information were perceived as particularly important. The experience of forced displacement required reacquisition of multiple types of knowledge, about how systems work, where to go for assistance and about cultural and societal norms. Information then was both tangible – a list of colleges, instructions on what rights people had to housing, details of community groups in the local area; and less concrete – how to navigate the UK labour market, what to expect from workplace relationships. Information exchange was not always a one-way street; information acquisition can be a collective effort that takes place outside formal structures and in a spirit of reciprocal assistance.

> ***"Because we came from the same country, and then we speak the same language, and we discuss about these things. [...] They get information from me, I get information from them, and with that information I just do everything. So just every time just, you don't remember who told you this, who told you this, but collectively, we discuss these things, and then that thing, it comes to your mind. When you need it, you use that."***
> (Johannes, interview participant)

Several participants explained how, now that they understood systems better having been in the UK for some time, they were helping other more recent arrivals with

[8] The contributing panellist's website is available here: http://www.hyabyohannes.co.uk

information and advice. Some participants described information acquisition as a process of finding out, re-ordering and then taking action themselves, with information acting as a resource for, and a pre-condition to re-establishing independence and agency. While refugees were generally able to source information from either personal or organisational connections, many had also relied on Google or social media. The frequency with which people gleaned important information from the internet highlights that many refugees have existing digital skills and use very similar methods to other residents:

> ***"I would say the main thing is Google. The thing is that it doesn't show you all the information and not everything that an organisation do or can help you with is listed on the website. I try to ask everybody I know because I'm sure someone knows something. But when you don't have a lot of connections and when you don't, or you're a shy person, then that will be an obstacle. Because you can't get everything from Google, that's the problem."***
> (Safina, peer volunteer)

However, information found from Google was often cross-checked with 'in-real-life' contacts for relevance and accuracy and could not alone be fully trusted. As Safina explained, for anyone who is isolated or feels unable to make connections, this could leave them without access to the information they require.

4.2.2 Access to essentials

For refugees re-building homes and lives, accessing essential items (money, furniture, clothing, food) was a key function of important social connections. For Tsegaye, Scottish Refugee Council and other local charities had sourced not just housing but financial support when she was left destitute following refusal of her initial asylum claim. After she had been recognised as a refugee, this help continued, cementing what for her was a deep and personal connection with these organisations:

> ***"Even I have very difficult life with Home Office housing process but [Scottish Refugee Council] was behind me, they help me… […] they are still working [to help me] …after I get refugee leave to remain, they finish all the child benefit … from the reception to the manager, yes I've known them for seven years…"***
> (Tsegaya, refugee participant)

Churches and mosques were often cited as key providers of essential items at different stages of people's pathways. While for some people faith-based groups were primarily important so that they could worship with others of the same faith, for other people these places and

communities served a variety of other needs:

> ***"They don't want to care about your faith, both Muslims and Christians go there, so many Muslims are doing voluntary work there in that church. They worship there but on Sundays and they will not even tell you about their church, if you go there they will ask you 'what do you need, how can we help you, what kind of thing do you need?' You tell them this is what you need, and they will deliver for you. It has nothing to do with your faith, they don't even care what kind of faith you belong to."***
> (Zahrah, interview participant)

Zahrah spoke warmly of a second-hand furniture project run by a Glasgow church that helped people who had been provided with poor quality goods in asylum accommodation to source more suitable household items; Ava had met friends at church who brought her food when she first moved into her home; Nadia had been able to find affordable food via various mosques and churches in Glasgow. Other participants also spoke of notable acts of generosity, sometimes from unexpected sources. Diego, who had extended family in Glasgow, made close friends with a worker in an asylum hotel, who in turn introduced him to a friend who visited him to deliver furniture and gave him a large cash gift for his grandchildren. A complete stranger gave Monica £100 to help her and her four children get a taxi to their accommodation when she was newly arrived and lost in Glasgow.

While many of the accounts of connections providing essentials illustrate that a positive network of charitable support exists in Scottish cities, in other cases people appeared grateful and somewhat surprised even to receive their statutory minimum entitlements from the Home Office or other statutory agencies during the asylum process. Eugene, who repeatedly expressed his gratitude to Mears Group and the Home Office and had enjoyed a close connection with his Mears Group Housing Officer, situated them as two of his most important connections because, when he arrived with nothing in the UK, they provided key essentials without which he would have been left on the streets:

> ***"I would start with the Home Office, because when I was – I didn't know anything, no accommodation, nowhere, they gave me a place to stay and they gave me food, so I would start with those."***
> (Eugene, interview participant)

Indeed, for Eugene as for several other participants, the asylum and asylum support processes – which have been widely critiqued elsewhere[9] - did seem to have worked as planned, and he was one

[9] Asylum Inquiry Scotland

of a number participants who mentioned the Home Office as having been essential because of their role in recognising them as refugees.

While being able to access essential items was one facet of important connections, the results of this flow of tangible resources often went beyond simply satisfying basic needs. Many participants felt that this made them feel cared for, cementing a broader sense of being accepted and respected:

> ***"Thank goodness, I can eat, I have a roof over my head, and I have clothes, and they made me feel – they make you feel respected, like a living human being. Other than that, I don't really need much else."***
> (Mahmoud, refugee participant)

4.2.3 Access to other organisations

Participants had valued being able to connect with people or organisations who themselves were well-connected and could therefore enable onwards connections. Integration service partners were experienced as key brokers to other organisations:

> ***"SRC put me through how to connect with some organisations that can be of help. They let me understand that any time I'm in trouble, if I'm facing challenges I don't understand, if I don't know how to do something […] I can come for them for help. If they can help they will help me, if they cannot help they will connect me to those people that can help. They are a like a channel for me to understand. Because they can connect to Council, they have connections with Migrant Help, with anybody, depends on what you are looking for…"***
> (Zahrah, interview participant)

The absence of key brokers was keenly felt by one participant who had moved to Edinburgh for work.

> ***"I think that will be helpful if someone can find the good information and be surrounded by good people who can help them to make all those links. That would be helpful, but to find the connection or to be connected that is the issue."***
> (Benjamin, workshop participant)

Benjamin had had a difficult experience in accessing support or being signposted to connecting organisations, either from the Scottish Refugee Council or any other

organisation. It seemed that both the fact that he was based in a city where there were relatively fewer community organisations (compared to another workshop participant based in Glasgow) made it harder for him to find the support to settle and to broker other connections. Being in full-time work also meant that he had little time to make connections outside the workplace, and he fed back that he felt no-one had followed up with him to support him in building cultural knowledge and navigating systems in a new area.

From a practitioner perspective, the role of brokering was not always simple. Connecting refugees with statutory organisations that control access to crucial resources such as housing and financial support can require significant advocacy and time from practitioners:

> ***"The importance of understanding these relationships is, how as an organisation, how can we use these relationships to actually have a stronger voice to influence the systems basically, make them more accessible."***
> (Learning event participant)

Social connections – as levers for wider systems change – involve harnessing the power and knowledge within refugee communities and working together collectively. This is further underpinned by the limited resources available to refugee-supporting organisations in a time of austerity:

> ***"We as an organisation can't do it on our own, and we can't support everybody and we can't work with everybody, but what do we have in our gifts to actually work with other parts of society to improve people's lives."***
> (Learning event participant)

This network is not limited to statutory or refugee-supporting organisations; for many people, friends or family members living in the UK had been equally if not more important, both as help-givers and recipients of support. Where a connection had been positive for one person, they were likely to recommend and facilitate others' access to it. This is a reminder to service providers of the importance of word of mouth in building their reputation as an organisation worth connecting with:

> ***"[people] I met here, or they came from another country, like my cousin, he came here and I keep his hand and I brought him to Bridges programme, and I said, 'You have to know here, and you have to work with them because they will help you a lot.' [...] Try to work with them, try to be in contact with them,' because I lost a lot of time. It was wasting time. I don't want to anybody else be in the same position like me."***
> (Maria, workshop participant)

Nonetheless, informal connections can only be of use if they themselves are well linked in. One peer volunteer explained that in his view, if he had only had contact with other asylum seekers, he would not have been able to find the information and contacts he needed to begin working. Instead it was a Scottish friend he had met through English classes and who worked in the same field as him who had, as he explained, "opened the doors" that led him into paid employment in his specialist profession (Joe, peer volunteer). This was also reflected in participants' low levels of trust in family members overseas; rather than not trusting them in general terms, participants explained they did not trust family living remotely to be able to help them in this country due to their lack of familiarity with the systems, people or places. Connections then must themselves be well connected if they are to enable onwards access to wider, productive social networks.

4.2.4 Meeting people and countering isolation

Participants had valued being able to connect with people or organisations who themselves were well-connected and could therefore enable onwards connections. Integration service partners were experienced as key brokers to other organisations:

The final functional role that emerged most strongly from our analysis was that positive connections who enabled refugees to meet others countered feelings of isolation and loneliness. Church and other faith groups were very important in this regard. Elements of church or mosque life involving preparing and sharing food provided space to meet others, participate as volunteers and meeting others on equal terms.

Practitioners provided valuable insights into the work of facilitating such encounters. Speaking of communities of interest, it was noted that what people have in common often transcends nationality or language group and re-centres understandings of community around shared experiences – for example, life as new mothers or leisure activities. The role of children in facilitating parents' contacts with others echoes the research team's own previous work with refugee families[10]:

> ***"Libraries, community centres and some church activities, especially at Christmas, they do dinner and lunch, and it's a good opportunity to people to go and find friends and get together. And the leisure centre, gym and some other activities for kids. When I enrolled my kids for swimming and gymnastics, I had the opportunity to meet other mums so I could talk to them, share experience, it was really beneficial."***
> (Amna, interview participant)

[10] Baillot, H., Kerlaff, L., Dakessian, A. and Strang, A. (2021) Pathways and Potentialities: the role of social connections in the integration of reunited refugee families [Project Report] Musselburgh: Queen Margaret University

Having young children can enable parents to connect with others, and access specialist services such as the SRC's Family Keywork service. While our analysis did not enable comprehensive group comparisons, it was striking that the people who recounted feeling alone or having limited connections were primarily living on their own, while those with family members in the UK often placed them, along with formal organisations, at the centre of their bullseyes. Previous work has highlighted that single men may face isolation during the asylum process[11]. Nonetheless, for some participants maintaining only a limited number of connections did not necessarily indicate isolation but was a more strategic decision to enable focus on other areas of life and – in some cases – were working towards family reunion which took much of their energy. As we have made clear throughout, a simple vision of the quantity of connections somebody has cannot be taken as a proxy for integration. It is their qualities, and an appreciation of their contribution to that person's life at that moment in time, that provides a more accurate appreciation of their role in integration.

4.3 Meaning of social connections

This section looks at the affective role of different types of social connections; how interactions with different individuals and organisations are *experienced* and what impact this has on people's feelings of settlement and inclusion or belonging in Scotland. We explore the meaning attached to interactions under three headings: transactional encounters, caring relationships and exclusionary experiences.

4.3.1 Transactional Encounters

How support was experienced related to the quality and the regularity of the interactions. Some relationships were experienced as transactional in serving (or not serving) a particular function at a specific point of need:

> ***"They [Migrant Help] produced me an effective service, which I needed, like accommodation and help funding money, a GP, stuff like that."***
> (Ali, interview participant)

Interactions with the same organisations could be experienced variously as utilitarian, caring or exclusionary depending on how attentively individuals responded to their needs. This was shaped by participants' experiences of feeling heard and understood. For example, while some participants had experienced the outreach service provided by the Council homelessness team as very responsive, others had been negatively impacted by lack of support:

[11] Strang, A.B. and Quinn, N. (2021) Integration or isolation? Refugees' social connections and wellbeing. Journal of Refugee Studies, 34(1), pp.328-353

"She [named worker] calls me, and when I have paperwork and I don't understand [...] I just call her, and when I call her she give me appointment, she come to me and she tell me everything, and about house as well. I was waiting for GHA, and one day I see she bring a lot of paper and she says, 'This is the application for a new house for another company, and we do it together.' And she explained to me what I need to do, and what is going to be done."
(Nadia, interview participant)

"Glasgow City Council, they don't even want to listen for me. I've not found favour in their presence, it makes me depressed... I don't like to have connection with them."
(Zahrah, interview participant)

Lack of responsiveness from services was characterised by 'waiting' to hear back from an organisation. This was experienced in accessing education and training, housing, benefits or employment support. Practitioners reflected these challenges for refugees in "integrating into austerity" and largely felt that the situation of refugees was only going to get more difficult in the current political and economic climate. The context of the interaction is crucial in understanding the meanings ascribed to them – some relationships are entered into by choice, where others are characterised by obligations. Navigating access to welfare systems through the local council, the jobcentre and the benefits system were experienced by some as unwanted but necessary connections which they were forced to negotiate at particular transition points in their lives. These systems themselves could be experienced as complex, onerous and disempowering; so much so that some participants made an active choice not to engage with them at all:

"They [Universal Credit] asked me for some details and I was actually very busy and they wanted much more communication and visiting there at least once a week, they provided me with 200 pounds per month, and it was really hard, they needed very much documentation and some mandatory reporting, and I was drawn back."
(Faaris, interview participant)

While Faaris felt that he had agency in choosing to withdraw his connection with Universal Credit, preferring to be financially independent, others may not have been in a position to exercise choice in this situation.

Transactional relationships were not only experienced with statutory providers, but also in some cases with informal connections with friends or acquaintances.

In contrast to unwanted formal connections however, there was more potential to choose to disengage from informal relationship which were not felt to not be providing a useful practical or emotional function:

> ***"Some people, you give them everything, but they all time just take your energy and you never can feel they are your friend, and just, you leave them."***
> (Maria, interview participant)

Positive relationships were experienced as "friendliness" and as practically useful, for example through a headteacher offering a participant's child lifts to school, or acquaintances exchanging information and advice:

> ***"[W]e like each other and we see each other. So I have a lot of friends, but we are not very close, just friend. 'Hi, Hi' 'I need that, you need that, OK, I will help you,' like this. "***
> (Maria, interview participant)

In some cases, these had developed into friendships over time. However as illustrated, helpful informal relationships with others are not always accompanied by high levels of trust and emotional connectedness.

4.3.2 Caring relationships

Consistent acts of support and sustained relationships with named individuals from organisations over time were experienced as acts of care and kindness and generated trusting relationships for participants. Some participants described these relationships a friendship or "like family":

> ***"The first time I went to that office, they related to me, they attended to me as if they'd known me, despite my problems, despite my challenges, despite the story, everything. They took me for whom I was then with my children, and they really take care of us, and up to now, I'll forever be grateful to Anissa. Her name is Anissa in Refugee Council – she has been so wonderful. She never for once get tired of me."***
> (Monica, interview participant)

> ***"And it was Anissa– oh, my God, she's my love [laughs] [...] every week she's just calling me and says, 'How are you?' It was really good because when you come this country and you don't know anybody, you're just alone, you know? And she take this loneliness from me, every week she calls us. She did everything for us."***
> (Maria, interview participant)

Participants' experiences demonstrate the time caseworkers take in developing an understanding of a person's situation and needs. Regular communication, attentiveness and desire to help works to counter feelings of social isolation. Interview participants gave multiple examples of acts of care, where they felt individuals and refugee-sector organisations had "been there", "stood by" or "stood with" them, offering emotional support, practical support and a sense of solidarity in supporting access to rights. These were especially felt when people were facing difficult situations in navigating the asylum application process or negotiating transitional periods such as finding housing or accessing employment:

> ***"They [Asylum Seeker Housing Project] can fight and make sure the person will get a proper house... and they guy that always do that job for people. [...] They [Govan Community Project] fight for immigration to support people not to be removed, all these things... they too are good..."***
> (Zahrah, interview participant)

These acts of care and expressions of solidarity contributed to peoples' self-confidence to advocate for themselves and gain access to rights and opportunities such as volunteering or paid employment (see Interim Reports 1 and 5 for further example). Expressions of welcome and feelings of inclusion were important particularly soon after arrival in Scotland. Faith groups and church connections had contributed to people's sense of belonging to a community:

> ***"When we first came here in Glasgow, we went to the church nearby our area, and we met another family who is Scottish, and they gave us a very warm welcome, and the community as well, they did at that time. We created a lot of friendships there."***
> (Theresa, interview participant)

> ***"And then the pastor actually was so welcoming that he even hugged us, and they really made us feel part. And that's been a year now that we are part of that community, so we have been attending for a year now."***
> (David, interview participant)

David was one of a few participants for whom his faith in God and sense that God was there to care for him was also central to his feeling of solidarity and of not being alone. Yet even those who accessed the church as a community meeting place or to volunteer discussed feeling accepted without judgement. However, some had also felt judged or even exploited in one case.

Other informal connections had also played a key role in the provision of

emotional and practical support and friendship. Shared social connections, values and beliefs can provide a foundation for developing a close emotional bonds:

> ***"Another important person in my life [laughs] is [...] my neighbour. She's Scottish, and when I moved to that accommodation, she was the first person to come and – we live at the floor over her flat, so you know the children running up and down, she said, 'Oh, no, it's OK.' I said, 'I'm so sorry.' So we started talking, and I got to know that she knows my pastor, she knows my friend [...]. I was amazed. So ever since then, we've been friends."***
> (Nadia, interview participant)

Nadia's neighbour had provided lifechanging support for her to navigate a child protection investigation, acting as her children's custodian until the situation had been resolved. Crucially, caring connections during transitions and in situations of need play a key role in feelings of welcome and inclusion.

4.3.3 Exclusionary experiences

Participants had also experienced acts of exclusion where they were actively discriminated against, ignored or were refused help to access their rights. The last of these had been experienced when support had not been provided, or had been withdrawn by a housing officer when a person had refused their first offer of housing, or when an immigration solicitor withdrawing their support (see Interim Report 7 for more on participant experiences in accessing settled housing):

> ***"There are like some organisations, like the situation that I'm in now, it's been for more than eight months, that my property has a problem. My ceiling was damaged. But the housing, they didn't help us properly, they just gave us some crazy reasons like it was coronavirus, it was pandemic, but from more than four months ago, some restrictions have gone and they could do something for us. But they really ignored us, they didn't do their job."***
> (Mia, interview participant)

There were a small number of participants who had suffered abusive and antisocial behaviour from neighbours, including abusive language, having eggs thrown at them and people urinating outside their house. In Monica's case, this left her children feeling scared and contributed to her looking for an alternative place to live:

"And when she sees us going out, and we met at the entrance, she will be saying, 'F[..] off! F[...] off!,' as in, you know, we are living here with fear of, ah, what will the neighbour do? What will the neighbour say? Even if my children are going to school, they are going on the staircase, they are always scared to say, 'Oh, I don't want the neighbour to see me. She might scream at me.'"
(Monica, interview participant)

These negative interactions can undermine trust in certain individuals or organisations. While acts of care and solidarity from other individuals and organisations could counter exclusionary experiences, barriers to support could nonetheless result in feelings of ongoing isolation and loneliness:

"Since I'm in Edinburgh, I am alone without any organisation. I am doing any other activity. I tried to reach some – I tried to reach out to [a university in Edinburgh]. Yeah, one day I went there, and yeah, that's it. I'm not interacting with anybody else. I tried to contact also [a service provider] from here but the process is too long, and a bit complicated."
(Benjamin, interview participant)

This highlights the importance of checking in, and following up on people's sense of wellbeing, which participants have experienced as acts of care.

4.4 Case study: Combining function and meaning

Monica's pathway provides an interesting case study, not because she is typical of the experiences we heard – as we have highlighted, there is no 'typical' experience' – but her experience illustrates the ways in which different connections can overlap in terms of form, function and meaning throughout people's lives in Scotland. A single mother with four children, Monica had arrived in Glasgow three and a half years prior to the interview, when she was still awaiting a decision on her asylum claim. Monica and her children spoke English fluently, which had not been the case for all our participants. Monica described her experience of settling in Glasgow in largely positive terms. During our conversation, she highlighted that Anissa, a member of Scottish Refugee Council's Family Keywork Service team, had made her feel accepted and cared for:

> ***"[She] took me for whom I was then with my children, and they really, really take care of us, and up to now, I'll forever be grateful to Anissa."***

Similarly, she was appreciative of the consistent communication and offers of help from Anita, the Employability Officer at Scottish Refugee Council in supporting her to prepare for and find employment after she was recognised as a refugee. Anissa had introduced Monica to her now close friend Abebi: *"it was Anissa that actually connected us together"*. Monica and Abebi discovered they shared a lot in common - not only did they come from the same country, but they were also both were living in the same neighbourhood, were single mothers and their children attended the same school. Their friendship also challenged them to transcend religious differences - Monica, a Christian was compelled to ask herself *"can I actually move with Muslim people?"* – something she admits she would not ordinarily have done. Their children had also connected. Monica considered the tie between them to be so strong, that they were her "family".

The fact that Abebi had been in the country longer than Monica and had been granted refugee status when they met meant that she was able to provide Monica with emotional support and reassurance as she navigated the asylum process:

> ***"She got her papers before me, so when I met her, she always tell me everything, you know, don't worry, your paper will come. They are so lovely in Glasgow, so she gave me the courage, and she always support me everything."***

Monica described her friend as very outgoing and someone with *"a lot of connections"*. Abebi acted as what Greene (2019) terms a "cultural broker"[12], connecting her other community groups and organisations such as African Challenge where she enjoyed events with her children, and to Positive Action in Housing who helped her to manage financially in her settled housing. At a later stage in her pathway, Abebi also made it possible for Monica to go to work by providing informal childcare. This highlights the various functions that a strong trusting tie such as Monica's friendship with Abebi can play in brokering both formal and informal connections that contribute to social and economic inclusion. It also demonstrates the valuable role that strong ties with friends can play in building confidence to participate in wider social realms, and to pursue rights such as seeking asylum.

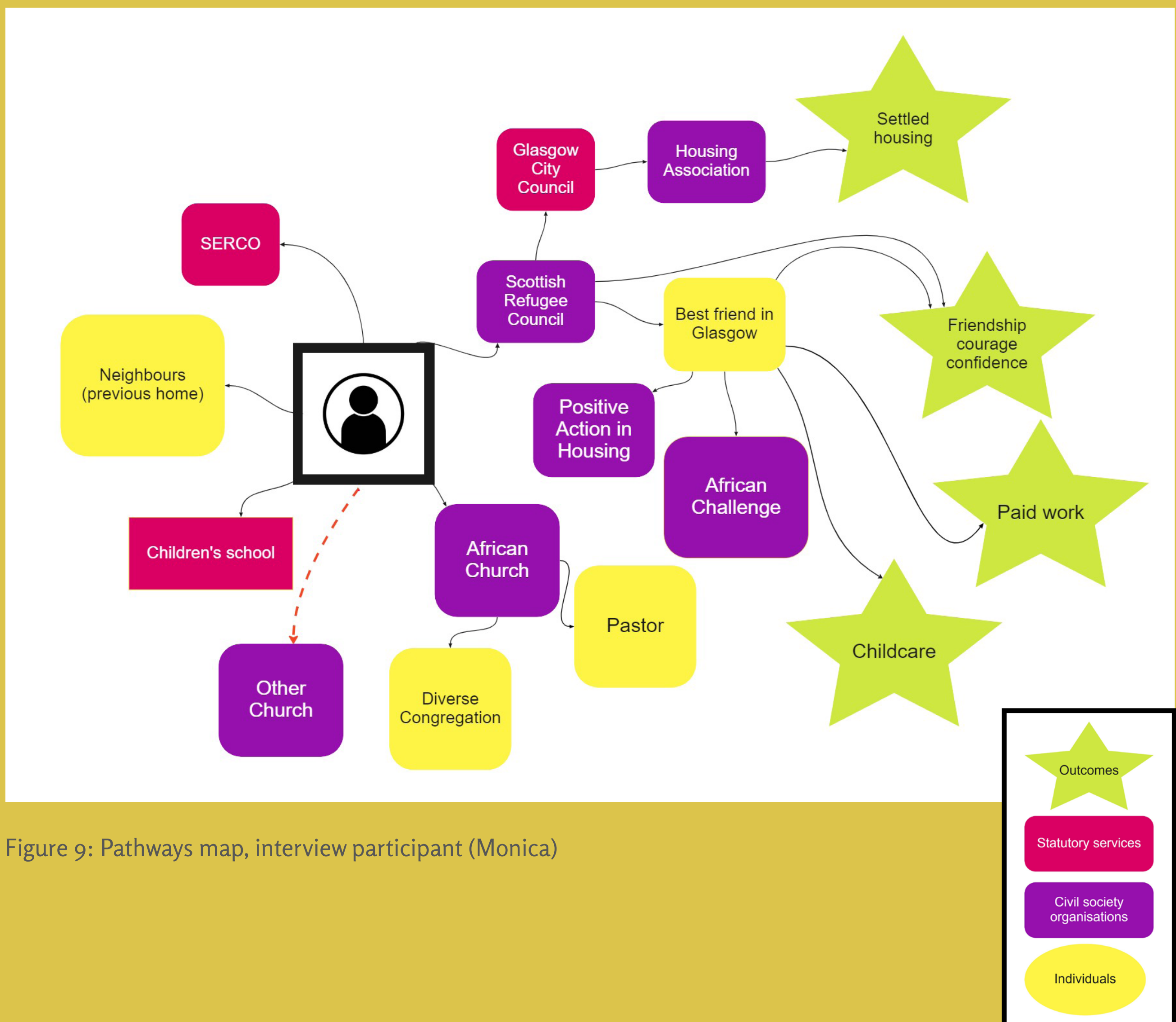

Figure 9: Pathways map, interview participant (Monica)

[12] Greene, R. N. (2019). 'Kinship, Friendship and Service Provider Social Ties and How They Influence Wellbeing among Newly Resettled Refugees.' Socius 5, 1-11

5. Conclusions

At the core of the project has been the recognition, based on twenty years of practice and research, that social connections are integral to integration[13]. The findings from the research component of the project confirm that integration is built around human connection. Social connections play multiple interrelated roles, depending on the form connections take, the functions they play in people's lives, and what connections mean to people depending on their personal circumstances, capacities, and aspirations. All these elements are crucial to understanding and supporting refugees' economic and social inclusion.

Understanding connections: quality over quantity

Our research illuminates the qualities of positive social connections and the ways in which these can serve multiple purposes. Refugees value connections that provide information, enable access to essentials and broker access to other key services or organisations. In addition to organisations, informal connections and close friendships are crucial for accessing information, developing links with new people and services, and feeling at home. Faith-based organisations play a particular role, not only through enabling worship but also as meeting places, and through the provision of essentials, volunteering opportunities and opportunities to build English language skills[14].

Trust in connections is cultivated through responsiveness and treating people with dignity and respect. The way these connections contribute to the re-building of confidence and self-esteem plays a central role in facilitating further social and economic inclusion. Conversely, feeling ignored, discriminated or disrespected can put a brake on inclusion, regardless of how much information or resources flow through a connection. In the face of systematic barriers, important connections not only signpost but also actively advocate for people's rights within systems that can act to exclude New Scots. This has been a key role played by integration service partners and other refugee-sector organisations. Acts of care and solidarity are not passively received but can contribute to peoples' confidence to advocate for themselves and gain access to rights and opportunities[15].

Building social connections engages all actors in integration

In the face of systematic barriers, refugee-sector practitioners spend significant time on meeting essential needs and this takes time away from focusing on longer term goals. This highlights the need for statutory systems that control access to key resources to adapt and improve. Particularly in cities and more rural areas without a long history of welcoming New Scots, refugees can face added barriers

[13] Ndofor-Tah, C., Strang, A., Phillimore, J., Morrice, L., Michael, L., Wood, P. and Simmons, J. (2019). Home Office Indicators of Integration Framework 2019: third edition.
[14] Vera Espinoza, M., Baillot, H., Käkelä, E., Dakessian, A., and Kerlaff, L. (in press). The role of social connections in refugees' pathways towards socio-economic integration. *Forced Migration Review.*

to social and economic inclusion without assistance from specialist organisations. Participants in this study were recruited through Integration Service partner organisations and most lived in Glasgow. As such, their accounts cannot be assumed to be fully representative of refugees' experiences across Scotland. However, refugees who were living outside the usual dispersal areas did indicate that there were gaps in the local infrastructures – specialist organisations, community groups, statutory provision – that our research indicates are vital to meet the needs of refugees settling into new areas. Discussions with practitioners, many of whom have more than a decade of experience in integration service provision, confirmed that there is a bank of existing good practice, and evidence, including from this project, of what refugees value when settling into new local contexts. This could be used to inform and shape future provision across Scotland and elsewhere.

Embedding social connections into service provision

Our research highlights the significant benefits that emerged from collaborating with our practice partners along the way. Our partnership served as a reminder for practitioners to further re-focus conversations with beneficiaries away from transactional problem resolution and towards a broader appreciation of their lives and goals:

"The survey shifts practice from a more transactional to a more holistic conversation on aspirations."
(Caseworker)

Our partnership has illuminated that it is more productive to discuss social connections in relation to other domains of integration, such as housing and employability, rather than to try to explore these in isolation. Building trusting relationships with named caseworkers is critical to adequately map and work towards integration goals. Notably, these services that provide opportunities for refugees to connect with others around common interests, for example through social activities or more formal peer-led projects, play an important role in building positive social connections.
In gathering accounts from beneficiaries and presenting these visually and narratively to share learning with practice partners, the research team's work added value to the project, beyond the production of knowledge:

"[research activities are] a space for the learners to express their experience that's out with [partner organisation]. And it also helps point towards future planning for us as well what direction we do in. And another piece of value to us as well is help with proof of the work that we do to funders."
(Learning event participant)

[15] Käkelä, E., Baillot, H., Kerlaff, L., and Vera-Espinoza, M. (2023). From Acts of Care to Practice-Based Resistance: Refugee-Sector Service Provision and Its Impact(s) on Integration. *Social Sciences 12*. no. 1: 39. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12010039

While the team did not have a formal role in evaluating the service, sharing findings along the way through interim reports helped service partners to understand where and how their work was having an impact and to justify their work internally and externally. All partners recognised research partnerships as an important tool in challenging the systemic barriers faced by refugees and asylum seekers:

> ***"We spend most of our time desperately getting the systems that do exist to actually work, to do as they're supported to do but also, yes, being able to draw evidence of what is systemically going wrong, how things need to be improved and then that can be brought forward to government for meaningful change."***
> (Learning event participant)

For both parties, we suggest that working together has encouraged us to recognise and put into practice what we already know to be accurate. The AMIF project supports integration. To do so effectively, each intervention needs to recognise that integration is a process that is experienced differently by each person. It is multi-directional in that it requires engagement and adaptation by all parties and can be impeded if key organisations and systems fail to adapt. Finally, and most fundamentally, human connection is central to both research and beneficiary-practitioner relationships. Creating and sustaining positive connections engages not only refugees, but all those working on a project like this one, that is dedicated to inclusion.

6. Recommendations

For all:
- Support the development of informal social connections in areas where services are being developed and delivered.

Future integration services should:
- Continue to embed an integration planning approach that recognises people's strengths and supports them to achieve their personal goals and aspirations.
- Embed discussions on social connections into all areas of the integration planning process rather than discussing these in isolation.
- Continue sharing information, learning and expertise with specialist refugee services, local authorities, community groups and refugee-led initiatives.
- Invest in building and maintaining positive social connections amongst local and national services, and across different sectors and regions.

COSLA, Local Authorities, and statutory services should:
- Develop a mechanism to map support networks in areas across Scotland to share information and enable effective referrals to them.
- Continue to engage with specialist practitioners, refugees and community groups to adapt services to diverse local contexts.

The Scottish Government should use existing New Scots structures to:
- Fund future integration services appropriately to enable the time required to realise a holistic approach to integration.
- Ensure statutory service providers adapt in order that refugees can independently access their rights.
- Resource formal and informal opportunities for English language learning across Scotland.

The UK Government should:
- Ensure that integration and migration policies are based on robust evidence and recognise the ways in which asylum policy impacts on integration.
- Recognise and fund work that situates integration as a holistic process, not a series of pre-determined outcomes.

Future research should:
- Build long-term research-practice partnerships that enable dialogue between practitioners, refugees and researchers, including practitioner and refugee input into the research process
- Expand refugee research into areas with less experience of refugee settlement.

Our Partners:

Adult Learning
Within Reach

https://www.qmu.ac.uk/schools-and-divisions/ighd/

miscintegrationresearch.org

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