



## Summary: ‘Support for Scotland’s Afghan refugee people: exploring social connections in Local Authorities with little previous resettlement experience

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

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

### Executive Summary

- The report is focused on Afghan citizens who have been resettled or temporarily accommodated in hotels in Scotland.
- It explores key social connections Afghan refugee people, local organizations, and service providers identify as necessary to integration.
- Resettled Afghan refugees living in hotels relied on caseworkers for support due to the isolating nature of their accommodation, and they relied on peer networks for psychological support.
- Living in hotels for extended periods caused physical and psychological distress for Afghans in Scotland making it difficult to progress with other activities such as language development and job seeking.
- The inability to work and lack of progress in English language skills had a negative impact on Afghan people's wellbeing and integration.
- One way to support refugee people and others in their communities is to facilitate inclusive access to local organizations and activities, such as language cafes and sports clubs, to build social connections.
- Future research should conduct a robust cross-regional study of the effectiveness of national integration policy, harnessing the support of all actors and incorporating longitudinal research.

### Project background

- In January 2022, the UK government pledged to resettle over 5,000 people in the first year of the Afghan Citizen Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and up to 20,000 in the coming years.
- There was room for enhancing integration services in less populated or inexperienced Local Authorities (LAs) by comprehending social connection requirements and developing social connection abilities among beneficiaries, locals, and service providers.
- The study's goals were to map Afghan beneficiaries' social connections by recognizing the significance of non-refugee social connections, identifying relevant social connections for integration highlighted by Afghan beneficiaries, locals, and service providers, and understanding the multi-directionality of integration.
- The UK has a rich history of sheltering individuals who seek refuge from persecution and conflict, predating the United Nations Geneva Convention of 1951, which recognized and safeguarded refugee rights more formally.
- The UK government has implemented policies to decrease asylum applications by restricting individual rights, including employment and social security access. Recently, border measures

like the Rwandan return scheme have been introduced but have faced legal challenges due to human rights violations.

## Research Methods

- This study included interviews with Afghan resettled refugees, and shared learning workshops with Afghan beneficiaries, local organizations, LAs, and research partners.
- Nine Afghan refugee participants were obtained from the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) database of temporary hotel accommodation residents.
- For qualitative interviews, three Afghan individuals in temporary hotel accommodation in Scotland were interviewed between August and September 2022.
- The research team faced limitations in recruiting Afghan refugee participants due to factors outside the control of project partners, resulting in only nine potential participants being available for interview and workshop attendance.
- A disproportionate number of men in the sample limited the representation of female Afghan refugees.

## Findings

### *Social Connections*

- The study involved social connection workshops with Afghan refugees, where researchers drew social connection maps and gathered feedback from participants on their relevance, relationships and referrals.
- Afghan participants identified LA, Home Office, Scottish Refugee Council caseworkers, and hotel staff as important social connections, while connections with local Scottish people were desired but difficult to forge.
- The participants highlighted the supportive role of caseworkers and informal peer networks of Afghan hotel residents.
- The LA workshop discussed the need for a well-funded regional integration strategy but emphasized the importance of personal bonds formed between refugee people and local residents.
- While hotel staff were mentioned as trusted points of support by Afghans, some refugee caseworkers warned that too much responsibility is currently falling to hotel staff, who often need to be trained to help facilitate the effective building of social connections between refugee people, organizations and communities.
- The need identified for more social connections between Afghan refugees residing in hotels and the local community organizations and individuals surrounding them.
- The interviews revealed that despite the significance of social connections among resettled Afghan people living in hotels, there was also a desire to establish connections with Afghan people outside the hotel for psychological support and networking.

### *Accommodation*

- All participants from the Afghan beneficiary cohort expressed challenges with their housing situation, including concerns about the quality of their accommodation, location, and whether it met their needs and the needs of their families.

- Afghan participants expressed concern about the need for more communication regarding their transition from hotel accommodation to permanent housing. They felt uncertain about when or how they would be able to move.
- The quality of food and lack of ownership over living space were two common complaints about the hotel accommodation.
- The conversations with resettled Afghans and their supporters validated the multifaceted impact of hotel accommodation on physical and mental health, highlighted in an earlier report.
- It was revealed that hotel staff should be more responsible in facilitating social connections between refugees, organizations, and communities. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of training provided to these staff members.

### *Job seeking*

- All participants from the Afghan beneficiary cohort expressed frustration due to their inability to progress in job search.
- Lack of employment opportunities caused anxiety, stress and feelings of powerlessness.
- The participants expressed their eagerness to contribute to society and their uneasiness with relying on government benefits.
- For many individuals, reconnecting with their sense of identity was closely linked with re-establishing their previous careers.
- A participant, who holds a master's degree, expressed his disappointment at not receiving interview invitations despite applying to entry-level or unskilled labour jobs, which he attributed to his limited proficiency in English.
- There were also examples of poor support administered by service providers to refugee people looking to start a business.

### *English language learning*

- Interviewees noted that not many structured opportunities for learning English were available.
- English language classes not only could assist individuals with finding employment and promoting self-reliance, but they could also provide avenues for social interaction, which can help expand their social circles.
- The representative from the local organization believed that the quality of the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision was as much of a concern as the quantity and that there should be higher standards across all providers.

### *Life in Limbo and Mental Health*

- In addition to reports of feeling as though they were unable to 'move forward,' some participants reported feeling 'stuck,' 'in limbo,' and 'moving backwards.'
- During the interviews with Afghan beneficiaries, concerns about the mental health of women in their families were raised, but the beneficiaries did not discuss their mental health.
- Due to limitations in accessing female participants, the researchers could not explore these issues in detail.

- The mental conditions of female refugees could have been affected as their outings were restricted, and they were anxious about how their outfits were perceived in their new environment.
- Health service visitors and charities were observed to employ positive trauma-informed and multiculturally sensitive practices.
- Whether supported greatly or not by community members or practitioners, suitable social spaces are necessary to ensure social connections can be built to benefit people's social wellbeing and mental health.

## Discussion

- Social connections are essential for the integration and mental health of Afghan refugees.
- Afghan refugees in isolated accommodations (hotels) rely on caseworkers and hotel staff as key points of contact, and they express a desire for connection with local groups or individuals outside of hotels.
- Afghan refugees have experienced trauma from their journey to Scotland and desire more tailored psychological support.
- Many refugees face structural and personal constraints, including difficulty in building English language skills, finding work, and uncertain housing situations.
- Accommodation is a critical factor in determining the ability of many Afghan people to start their lives in Scotland.
- Living conditions in inadequate housing impact people's mental and physical wellbeing.
- Afghan interviewees and workshop participants shared complaints of poor nutrition, lack of privacy, and feelings of confinement.
- Struggling without fulfilling employment significantly impacts the self-worth, independence, and sense of belonging of refugee people.
- Even highly qualified individuals are not successful in securing interviews due to their lack of English language skills.
- Local organizations run language cafes to provide flexible learning models and build important holistic social connections between people from different backgrounds.
- Shrinking public and third-sector capacity is a problem, especially for refugees in isolated hotel accommodations.
- There is a lack of experience and legal case support for vulnerable migrant people, resulting in rising destitution and a redirection of resources.
- Specialist training and ringfenced funding are necessary to support legal rights and trauma-informed practices for refugees.
- The Scottish and UK governments must ensure dedicated funding is available to recreate a progressive integration approach in different regions across Scotland.

## Recommendations

- There is a need to support establishing social connections for refugees and incorporating such discussions into integration planning and activities while emphasizing the need to share information between all actors at local and national levels.
- LAs, statutory services and New Scots working groups should ensure key service providers in areas with little previous resettlement experience are equipped with interpreting services and training in delivering multicultural and trauma-informed practices.

- These entities should participate in routine cross-sector, intra-regional, cross-regional, and lived-experience-informed forums and operational groups.
- The Scottish Government should provide ringfenced funding to ensure LAs and local organizations can access training and interpreting services for clients. It should increase legal aid funding to ensure refugee people are not unfairly denied access to support.
- The UK Government should entrust LAs to engineer their housing solutions for refugee people.
- Future research should facilitate a robust cross-regional study of the effectiveness of national integration policy, analyzing geographical nuances and incorporating longitudinal research.