



Pathways and Potentialities: the role of social connections in the integration of reunited refugee families

Research Findings and Implications

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This document summarises the qualitative findings from the research component of the Family Reunion Integration Service (hereafter FRIS). FRIS is a partnership project between British Red Cross, Queen Margaret University (QMU) and Barnardo's, funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). The service is offered to people granted refugee status through the UK asylum process, and who subsequently apply under family reunion rules¹ for their spouse and dependent children to join them in the UK; and to those arriving family members².

From January 2019 to September 2020, the QMU research team worked with project partners to design research that aimed to:

- understand refugee reunited families' social connections and how these impact on their wider integration; and
- develop a practical tool to measure these connections.

All research tools and activities were reviewed and approved by the QMU Ethics Committee, including the major revisions made to our plans due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research design is summarised in the diagram below.

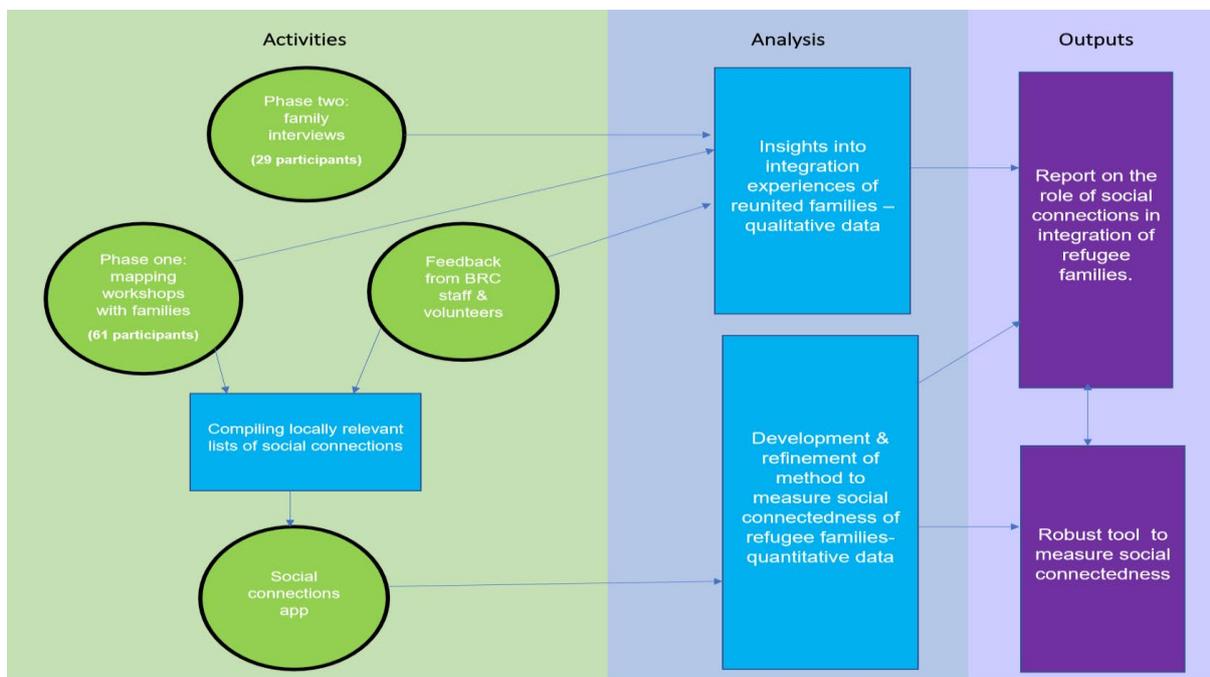


Figure 1: Research design

This summary report focuses on data gathered through mapping workshops and family interviews. Workshops with 61 adult participants - 35 women and 26 men - took place across the UK³. Family interviews were conducted remotely with 13 families living in either Birmingham or Glasgow and supported by Barnardo's. 21 adults and 8 young people took part. Eleven families were composed of a male sponsor, a female spouse and at least one child. Two families were single parent households headed by women.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/settlement-refugee-or-humanitarian-protection/family-reunion>

² For clarity, we use the terminology 'sponsor' to describe the person granted refugee status in the UK; and 'spouse' to describe adults who arrived as dependants of that person.

³ Workshops were held in the eight sites where BRC had FRIS teams: Birmingham, Glasgow, Leeds, Sheffield, Cardiff, Leicester, Belfast and Plymouth.

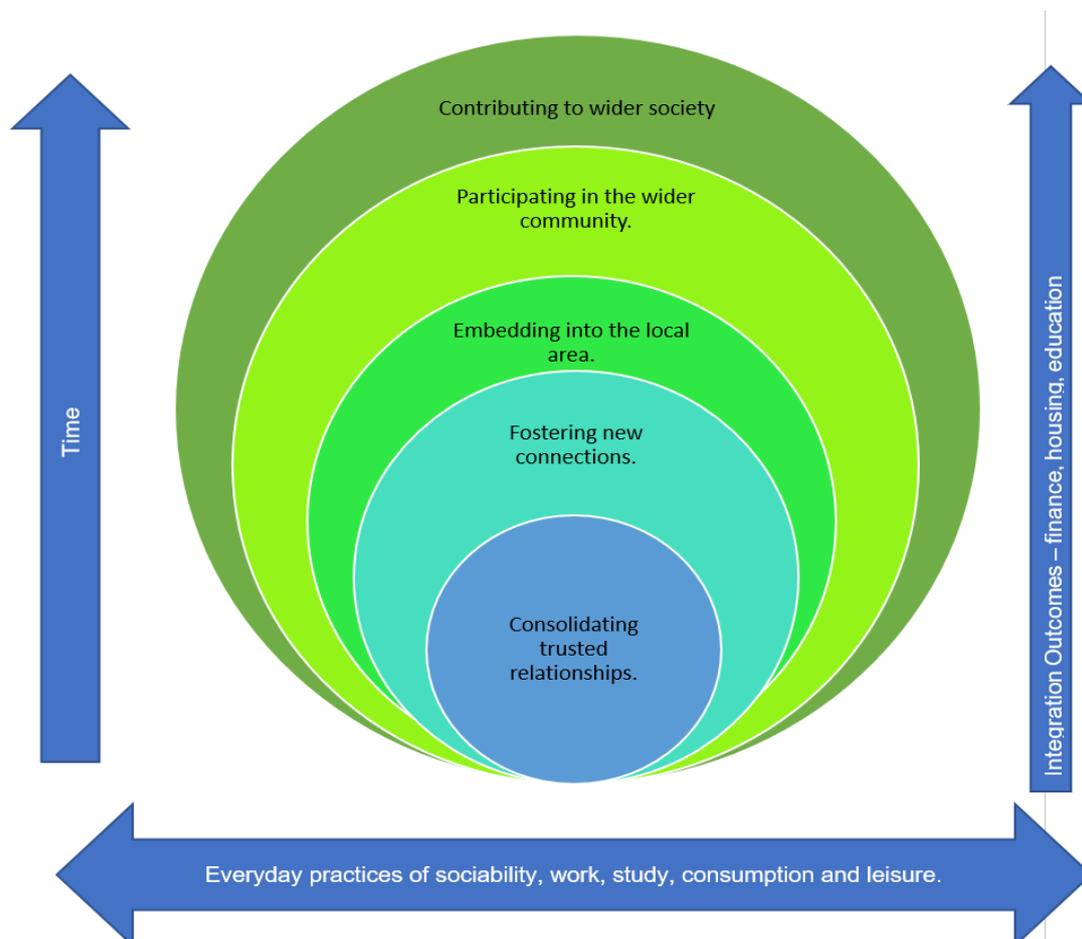


Figure 2: The Connections Continuum – the role of connections in integration

Integration as a Journey'- Five Stages of Social Connections

Five key stages emerged in the process of developing connections and, through these, progressing along a personal integration pathway. These stages are building blocks from which individuals and families could do the everyday work of integration. While connectedness, and so integration, generally increases over time, this process is not necessarily linear. Instead, it can be disrupted, halted or accelerated by the presence or absence of trusting relationships and life events. The five stages which emerged were:

1. **Consolidating trusting relationships and re-establishing a sense of safety and security in the home.** This is mediated primarily through longer established connections with friends and family, and through relationships with service providers who could facilitate access to basic needs.
2. **Fostering new connections.** For the families in this study, all of whom had school-age children, these were primarily formed with other children and parents by settling the children in suitable schools, ideally within

walking distance. This offered the opportunity for both children and their parents to make formal and informal connections.

3. **Embedding into the local area** by establishing a connection with people in the immediate neighbourhood. This is mediated through the presence or absence of a feeling of safety and inclusion / welcome in the area and the opportunities to meet others in public spaces such as local shops and parks and so make informal connections. Several families spoke warmly of building strong relationships with neighbours because their children played together.
4. **Participating in the wider community** through accessing formal community groups and clubs (for example, football groups, women's groups) that speak to people's skills, interests and aspirations to participate and give back. These are mediated by trusting relationships with people outside of our immediate circle.
5. **Contributing to wider UK society** by '*giving back*', an aspiration which can be realised through a multiplexity of bonding, bridging and linking relationships, built up over time.

Brakes and Accelerators to Building Trusting Relationships

As the Connections Continuum (figure 2) suggests, the refugee families who participated in the research were at varying stages of the integration process depending on their circumstances and priorities. The brakes and accelerators in building trusting relationships and moving through each of the five stages of social connectedness to integrate more fully are highlighted below.

1. Consolidating trusting relationships and re-establishing a sense of safety and security in the home

The priority for most families at this early stage of being reunited was to be together, feel safe in their home, and for the children to be settled in the home and at school.

Having reunited and begun to re-establish the family bond, parents were primarily concerned that their children felt safe and happy. Their upmost priority was to secure a place for their children in school, and then for them have opportunities to make friends and engage in extracurricular activities (such as clubs and sports).

Some families explicitly raised issues relating to adapting to different gender roles according to UK norms and values; and adjusting the balance of their childcare and domestic responsibilities to allow both adult family members time to study or work.

For people who had extended family living in the UK, these family members were most often a great source of comfort and support. In contrast, those families who did not have extended family in the UK, particularly those who did not speak English, missed their families back home acutely, with some turning to friends and workers from trusted organisations to fill that deep bonding connection.

2. Fostering new connections with others

Schools are a critical space for the formation of social relationships. Younger children's accounts of schooling illustrated the various levels at which schooling accelerated their integration journeys, including through the formation of friendships with classmates. These friendships, and school life generally, could be helped along where young people had been able to connect with other young people or teachers who spoke their language, facilitating their cultural and linguistic entry to schooling. The benefits of being in school extended well beyond the experiences of children. It allowed parents, too, to progress and to extend their own 'social' horizons.

The accounts and experiences of families who were facing difficulties registering their children in school further illustrated the extent to which experiences of integration pivot around school. Especially for older children, we understood that difficulties accessing schooling had profound impacts beyond the present, including on children realising their ambitions as regards academic and extra-curricular achievement. It was difficult for parents to focus on their own integration journeys whilst their children were not well settled.

Where pre-arriving sponsors had developed social networks in the UK *and* were able to share these networks with their newly arrived spouse, the bond between the couple acted as a bridge to friends and community activities. However, if sponsors did not have social networks themselves, or where women felt unable to build relationships with their husbands' friends, arriving spouses could be at a disadvantage.

3. Embedding into the local area

For most families, feeling safe and secure in their local area were paramount, meaning there was an absence of threat or conflict. Many families spoke of feeling 'comfortable' in 'quiet' or 'peaceful' areas. However, some described the area where they were living in negative terms and recounted instances of anti-social behaviour including drug dealing and threatening behaviour which made the family feel unsafe. This highlights the importance of safety as a facilitator for the integration process⁴.

A key factor in how happy family members felt about living in their area was the distance to their children's schools, shops, parks and community activities. People felt happy when they perceived there to be lots going on in the area. The proximity of amenities was important to families not only in meeting their immediate and practical needs, but in accessing opportunities to interact and start to build relationships with other people in the area.

Families' perceptions of the local area were shaped by relationships with neighbours. Whether or not participants felt that they were able to build positive relationships with their neighbours depended on three factors, including: 1) the opportunities available for meaningful interactions with them, 2) how friendly and open to establishing a relationship they were perceived to be, and 3) how much they felt they had in common with them. The data suggests that building relationships with people locally not only requires the right conditions but is also a process that takes time.

⁴ Home Office Indicators of Integration Framework 2019: third edition
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/835573/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019-horr109.pdf

Some participants had made an active choice to move to Birmingham or Glasgow from other parts of the UK. The reasons given included that these two cities were more ethnically diverse, friendly, accepting and offered greater educational and employment opportunities than smaller cities in the UK. In some instances, people came to the city because they had family or friends already living there.

4. Participating in the wider community

The families interviewed had been recently reunited – all of the spouses and/ or children had arrived in the UK between 5 and 11 months prior to interview. The majority of sponsors (11 out of 13) had been in the UK for anywhere between 14 months and 3.5 years. The two single mothers had been in the UK for 5 years and 9.5 years respectively. For some families, their principal priority was to consolidate the bonds between themselves, having recently been reunited after protracted separation. These families appeared less concerned with forming strong ties outside their immediate family for the time being.

However, a few of the more recently arrived families spoke of feeling lonely and isolated. These were mainly spouses and children who had not yet had the opportunity to enrol in school, language classes or in other activities. A key barrier to establishing friendships with people local to the area was a lack of English. In some cases, this even meant people were lacking in confidence to leave their home.

For some recently arrived families, there was an indication that some newer 'early-stage' relationships had the potential to develop into closer ties over time. These relationships tended to be with people whom participants had met during the course of their daily activities, such as taking children to school or to the park. Sporting activities were a crucial conduit towards connection and a sense of belonging for some young people.

Conversely some friendships appeared to be more 'superficial' - where participants had little inclination to develop a closer relationship. These tended to be with acquaintances from English as a second language (ESOL) courses or other regular activities such as going to the mosque or church.

Many families had close friends from within co-national communities living locally or in the same city. This bond with people from the same country provided a source of comfort, support and offered a stable stepping-stone from which to explore a wider geographic and social terrain. Facilitating factors for developing friendships outside co-national groups include access to community spaces; formal connections through organisations that offer befriending or hosting services; and activities based around a common interest such as football or music.

5. Contributing to wider UK society

The most prominent type of reciprocity that emerged from family interviews was a desire to '*give back*' to society, represented both by a stated desire to volunteer within formal organisations, and more generally, to a broader desire to be good citizens who could contribute to society and the UK state. However, being able to contribute emerged as contingent on having the time to get practical and emotional

issues in one's own life sorted out, and then begin able to move on to make the contribution to society that refugees in this study sought to achieve.

Everyday Agency and Structural Barriers

The research findings support an understanding of refugee integration that privileges everyday experiences. It is in the everyday tasks of raising a family, going shopping, taking exercise and attending school that much of the work of building connections, and so of integrating into a new country is accomplished. The everyday nature of families' integration is perhaps most evident in their responses to COVID-19 lockdown measures. In many ways, the preoccupations expressed by refugee families in response to the exceptional circumstances imposed by lockdown were similar to many people's concerns.

An understanding that many of the preoccupations of refugee families are common to all families, in turn promotes recognition of people's agency in developing social connections. These relationships themselves have further integrative potential. There is evidence throughout our findings of people's agency in choosing which connections to build, for what purposes and at what stage in the pathway we outline above.

Elevating the everyday offers an opportunity to move away from thinking of refugees as passive victims of circumstance and towards a deeper recognition of people's agency and desire for independence. It does not, however, mean discounting real structural and systemic experiences of discrimination recounted by some of the refugee families. Nor does it detract from the critical importance of negotiating immediate priorities (such as securing stable accommodation and school places) and through this, of meeting personal and familial goals. The specific challenges faced by some of the families interviewed during the research are highlighted below.

Structural and Systemic Challenges

A picture emerged from our interviews of the statutory housing system as being relatively inflexible and hard to navigate. Several people recounted being told that they had to accept offers of housing that in some cases were clearly unsuitable or unsustainable, and yet not feeling empowered to challenge this. By contrast, where families were concerned or dissatisfied with the school allocation process, we were told of several examples where people had taken matters into their own hands and directly contacted schools or local authorities to ensure that their children could register at the school they had selected.

The project partners (British Red Cross and Barnardo's) were vital connections that mediated families' contacts with agencies of the state. For some families, the level of care provided by workers within third sector organisations seemed to transform their relationship with these organisations from formal, linking connections into relationships that involved high levels of interpersonal trust.

While the majority of families did not lack linking connections and sought to exert their own agency to understand and navigate systems, it was clear that connections

alone cannot always overcome the structural confines of statutory systems and their impact on refugee integration.

The Impact of COVID Restrictions on Integration Journeys

The unanticipated onset of lockdown measures to combat COVID-19 ruptured people's everyday routines, rhythms and mobilities. Initially, the opportunity to make up for lost time among family units was welcomed by some families, particularly those who had only recently been reunited. However, several families told us of the challenges they faced in keeping children active while also trying to avoid disturbing their neighbours. This was most keenly felt by those who had been allocated housing in blocks of flats. Accounts of how to entertain children were reflective of the progress families had made in their integration journeys more broadly. Those who had already established relatively stable routines and everyday relationships felt the rupture of lockdown more keenly than those who were less established when lockdown was imposed. Families' digital inclusion (or exclusion), defined as having access to broadband internet and appropriate devices, was a critical factor in whether family members were able to contact friends, keep up with news and continue schoolwork during lockdown.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest that reunited refugee families are at varying stages of the integration process depending on their circumstances and priorities. Their ability to progress along their chosen integration pathway is partly mediated by the absence or presence of trusting relationships, in addition to structural and systemic factors. Highlighted below are a series of implications and suggestions for policy and practice in supporting refugee families to exercise agency in building their own social networks and facilitating their progress along their personal integration pathways.

Supporting families to map a pathway towards meeting their personal integration goals: There is a key role for agencies to continue to support reunited families to identify their short to long term goals in terms of participating fully in society and setting out a pathway for their family to integrate in the UK.

Supporting refugee families to feel safe and secure in their homes and in their local areas: Refugee families need clear and full information of their rights and options in, for example, choosing suitable accommodation for their families, in an area that is accessible to schools and local amenities.

School is a key accelerator for integration: Refugee families who experienced delays in accessing school places were at a disadvantage in developing informal and formal connections with other children and parents and were more vulnerable to experiencing loneliness and isolation.

Being housed in a friendly area with access to local amenities is a protective factor in local integration: The data suggests that building relationships with people locally not only requires the right conditions but is also a process that takes time. Facilitators include opportunities for interaction, friendliness of neighbours and a sense of commonality.

A lack of supportive bonds in the UK: Refugee families who do not have extended family in the UK and acutely miss extended family in their home country, may find it harder to progress along their integration pathway than those who have family support in the UK.

Opportunities to enrol in school, language classes or in other community activities are key protective factors in building wider social networks: Key barriers to establishing friendships with people local to the area included a lack of opportunity to meet people, and low confidence in English.

Refugees expressed a desire to contribute to wider society: being able to contribute emerged as contingent on having the time to get practical and emotional issues in one's own life sorted out, and then begin able to move on to make the contribution to society.

Supporting refugee families to develop and strengthen their social networks

Supporting refugee families to exercise agency to develop their social networks offers an opportunity to move away from thinking of refugees as passive victims of circumstance and towards supporting them to build full and independent lives in the UK.

Social connections alone cannot always overcome the structural confines of statutory systems and their impact on refugee integration: Third sector organisations provide vital connections to many families in supporting them to overcome structural barriers (in accessing suitable housing for example) but they are not enough on their own.