

Cricket and Afghan Integration in Scotland: A Case Study

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Overview

This briefing shares findings from a British Academy funded research project conducted in the North and North-East of Scotland. The research examined the way in which cricket has served as a vehicle for the integration of young people from Afghanistan in Scotland.

We spoke with cricket club members, local authority representatives and third sector practitioners to build a picture of Afghan young people's involvement in grassroots cricket. We sought to understand how sport can contribute to processes of integration that involve refugee people and other members of receiving communities.

Context

Rural communities in Scotland have long histories of emigration and in-migration. However, the nature of in-migration to rural areas in Scotland has been re-shaped in recent years by UK Government policies such as the Refugee Resettlement Scheme, the National Transfer Scheme and the policy of full asylum dispersal.¹ These programmes have led to an increase in the number of refugee people arriving in communities outside of Scotland's Central Belt.²

Scotland's National Refugee Integration Strategy offers a framework for all members of society to contribute to the integration of *New Scots*. Access to leisure activities is recognised in the strategy, and associated frameworks, as a core integration domain.³ There is evidence that grassroots sports can offer a transformative environment where people can meet, mix and share skills without regard to immigration status or national origin. This is the starting point for our work focusing on the role played by cricket in the lives of young Afghan people.

Our Project

This study considers the experiences of Afghan young people and other club members involved in grassroots cricket in the North and North-East of Scotland. Our decision to focus on young people from Afghanistan is grounded in the demographics of young people arriving in the UK. In the year ending 2023, the top country of origin for young people arriving without a parent or guardian was Afghanistan.⁴

We were aware of the cultural importance of cricket to Afghan young people, and in our previous research and practice work we had heard anecdotal evidence that many Afghan boys and young men were becoming involved with local cricket clubs in rural areas of Scotland. This inspired the research team to propose a scoping study with the hope of informing wider research into the role of sport in multi-directional integration. Between April and July 2024, we made contact with cricket clubs across the North and North-East, and conducted two visits to local cricket clubs based in small towns. One of the clubs was located in a smaller village with membership drawn from within a wider

rural area, but both were accessible from larger towns and cities in less than 30 minutes by car. The research team also reached out to stakeholder organisations including SportScotland, Cricket Scotland, the North of Scotland Cricket Association (NOSCA), local cricket coaches, representatives of community sport in selected local authorities and local authority integration managers. The research team held six individual online meetings and one broader online workshop with these stakeholders to identify common themes and consider findings. Those research themes identified from engagement with stakeholders are grouped below.

Accessing Cricket & Other Sporting Opportunities

The importance of recreation and sport for recently arrived young people, including those living in asylum hotels, was reiterated by many of those we spoke to. Leisure activities were regarded as second only to preoccupation with legal processes related to asylum claims. Where young people had been able to join local cricket clubs, stakeholders indicated that the Afghan players had become part and parcel of the clubs and groups they took part in and were often very talented. Stakeholders outlined a number of key points relating to ensuring that young people could access these opportunities:

- Young people left activities feeling better about themselves, it was felt that sport enabled young people to combat feelings of boredom, frustration, low mood and anxiety.
- Community sport officers played an important role in engaging young people in sport. In one local authority community sport workers facilitated a tape-ball cricket session which was very well attended and proved invaluable in signposting young men who were living in hotel accommodation to go on to join cricket clubs. This was regarded as beneficial for local clubs in bringing in new players.
- Paying for memberships, kit and transport was raised as a challenge. Issues around funding were partially resolved through reaching out to Cricket Scotland, local authority arms-length leisure and sports organisations and other groups.
- Equipment and sports kit donations had been a successful way of reducing the barriers to participation in cricket and sport more generally.
- Nevertheless it was acknowledged that there were challenges linked to covering the cost of transport to games for Afghan players.
- There was evidence of positive work in relation to other sports and activities. Informal sessions for football were well attended and had resulted in some players transitioning into local clubs.
- Efforts had also been made to provide bicycles for those living in hotel accommodation and in one area, an initiative to offer female only sessions at a local pool for a group of resettled women had been highly successful.

Sport & Wellbeing

The stresses that Afghan young people may have experienced before, during and after their journeys to the UK have been well-documented.⁵ Wellbeing is often thought of as an issue for the individual, however recent research has highlighted the relational dimension to wellbeing, with a focus on how people ‘maintain, or try to maintain, responsibility for each other’s health, happiness and prosperity through acts of caring and sharing’.⁶ Observations from this project confirmed that cricket clubs have enabled young people to build connections, develop relationships but foremost play the sport they love and enjoy. Stakeholders also noted that:

- Taking part in sport was seen as having a holistic benefit to those involved. It was seen to help people, as it would anyone else – benefiting overall wellbeing, confidence, socialisation, and developing new skills.
- Positive relationships had developed between young Afghan people and others involved in the cricket clubs. This had resulted in a sense of shared identity and connection between all involved in the clubs.
- Taking part in cricket had assisted Afghan young people, and others, to make connections with peers, and had assisted in language acquisition.
- Clubs and those who facilitated activities acknowledged that the participation of young people gave them the opportunity to succeed, put down roots and to develop as players.

Reciprocity

Even in this small-scale study, there was evidence that the arrival of young Afghan boys and men to communities outside the Central Belt of Scotland and the work around their integration has had wider benefits to the local communities who welcomed them. Cricket clubs could be considered a microcosm of the reciprocity and mutuality between communities. These interactions serve to counter dominant narratives relating to hostility and unease within local communities at the presence of refugees. It was recorded that:

- The cricket clubs, many of which had been struggling due to dwindling interest and the ageing out of its membership, had received a new lease on life with the arrival of young Afghan talent. This had resulted in increased membership and funding from the local community.
- Neighbouring cricket clubs had also stepped-up efforts to recruit players amongst the new arrivals, and had done so by organising free transportation from the asylum hotel to the club and back for training and matches.
- Efforts to engage Afghan young people had been an opportunity for some clubs to consider their involvement in local communities more widely and extend existing community engagement work.
- For young Afghan people living in the North and Northeast of Scotland cricket club members and organisers had become seen as trusted figures and proxy family members.

- The clubs offer not just an opportunity to participate but also a support system of invested and compassionate community members. Clubs provided routine and structure in an otherwise unstructured and uncertain existence within the asylum limbo, offering a sense of purpose and belonging.
- On the community level, increased consideration for the needs of New Scots has benefited the wider community. In particular the introduction of inclusivity schemes such as pay-what-you-can memberships and kit donations had benefitted clubs as a whole. These are positive factors recognised as vital to the restorative approach to integration outlined in the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy.⁷

Transience

The nature of the asylum system means that refugees are often placed for short periods in local areas before being moved to different accommodation or choosing to live elsewhere. This has provided both challenges as well as opportunities for community organisations and Scottish local authorities involved in asylum and refugee integration. It was noted that:

- Often when immigration statuses change refugees tend to move to larger cities where they have friends, extended family or connections with diaspora communities.
- This has been a challenge for local clubs, some of whom have had a significant number of players move on.
- Nevertheless, the experience of working with individuals involved in the asylum system has meant that increasingly local authorities, community organisations and sports clubs are better prepared for future intakes.
- Community sports and clubs have therefore adapted to build sustainability into their programming.

Community Building

De-population and other distinct issues for rural regions of Scotland mean that there are challenges around resourcing, access to key services and amenities and opportunities for employment. Those involved in integration work emphasise the need for the Scottish Government and other actors to support the development of local services to tackle challenges that are particular to those refugees living in rural Scotland. Our scoping research indicates that cricket clubs, and other grassroots sporting structures, have strong potential to consolidate local integration infrastructures as outlined here:

- Cricket offers a space which can contribute to young people's wellbeing and provides an opportunity for participants to expand their social connections.
- Building relationships through shared sporting activities builds a sense of belonging and stability. This is important for many young people who have often been affected by isolation and low mood.
- The positive experiences of integration in cricket clubs in the North and North-East of Scotland demonstrates potential for replication in different parts of the country.

Recommendations

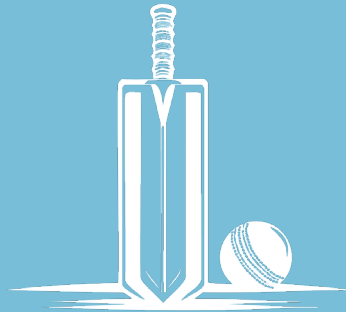
Our scoping research has identified the promising role of cricket and sport more widely to improve the wellbeing of refugee people. We argue that the work of local cricket clubs and community sport in the North and Northeast of Scotland has served to benefit integration and strengthen communities in the process. Cricket presents ample opportunities for multi-directional integration, with players mixing from different backgrounds. From our observations, these dynamics and benefits of integration extend beyond the club environment.

The recommendations from our research relate to the following:

- Cricket Scotland to continue to promote the important role cricket can play in integration.
- Further recognition from the Scottish Government of the role of Sport in the process of integration.
- Enhanced resourcing for the work of community and club sport in relation to integration work.
- Continued support for individuals involved in integration work to raise capacity amongst club sports.
- Engagement of national, public and third sector bodies in the delivery of shared learning and regional forums with specific sports such as cricket.
- For sporting bodies to consider increasing the representation of refugee people in decision-making positions in the long term.
- Further research into the potential of similar community sport initiatives to foster refugee support and wider social cohesion.

Endnotes

- 1** Department for Education & Home Office, National Transfer Scheme Protocol for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children Version 6.0, (Department for Education & Home Office 2023). https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64ddd30060d123001332c686/National_Transfer_Scheme_NTS_Protocol_for_unaccompanied_asylum_seeking_children_UASC_.pdf [Last Accessed, 22/07/2024]
Georgina Sturge, (2024) "Asylum Statistics," (House of Commons Library, 2024). <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01403/SN01403.pdf> [Last Accessed, 22/07/2024]; Melanie Gower, Safe and legal routes to the UK for people seeking protection, (House of Commons Library, Research Briefing, 2023) <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9630/CBP-9630.pdf> [Last Accessed, 22/07/2024]
- 2** The Central Belt is a large urban and semi-urban area with a population of approx. 2.3 million people, it includes the cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh and surrounding satellite towns.
- 3** New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: 2024 - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)
[Home Office Indicators of Integration framework 2019 third edition - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/home-office-indicators-of-integration-framework-2019-third-edition)
- 4** Refugee Council (2023) "Refugee Asylum Facts Top 10 Facts about Refugees and People Seeking Asylum", Refugee Council. <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/top-10-facts-about-refugees-and-people-seeking-asylum/> [Last Accessed, 22/07/2024]. Georgina Sturge, (2024) "Asylum Statistics," (House of Commons Library, 2024). <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01403/SN01403.pdf> [Last Accessed, 22/07/2024]
- 5** Daniel-Calveras, A., Baldaquí, N., & Baeza, I. (2022). Mental health of unaccompanied refugee minors in Europe: A systematic review. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 133; Chase, E (2021). "Transitions, capabilities and wellbeing: How Afghan unaccompanied young people experience becoming 'adult' in the UK and beyond." *Children of the Crisis*. London: Routledge, pp 125-142.
- 6** Ravi Kohli, Sharon McGregor and Kate MacKinnon, *Policy Briefing: Wellbeing in the Lives of Young Refugees in Scotland*, (University of Strathclyde, University of Bedfordshire, 2024) <https://uobrep.openrepository.com/handle/10547/626212> [Last Accessed 23/07/2024].
- 7** Sport Scotland, Kit for All, March, 2023 <https://sportscotland.org.uk/kit-for-all> [Last Accessed, 22/07/2024] Sport Scotland, *The Changing Lives Through Sport & Physical Activity Fund*, August, 2023 <https://sportscotland.org.uk/clubs/changing-lives-through-sport-and-physical-activity/the-changing-lives-through-sport-and-physical-activity-fund> [Last Accessed 22/07/2024]
[New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: 2024 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-scots-refugee-integration-strategy-2024)



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