



## REFUGEE SETTLEMENT SNAPSHOT 2018: AUBURN, NSW



(Photo: Dimitria Groutsis, 2017)

In 2017 the number of refugees arriving in Australia effectively doubled the intake of previous decades. This is because most of the special one-off intake of 12,000 Syrian Conflict refugees that was announced by Prime Minister Abbott in 2015 in fact arrived in 2017. In addition, the annual intake of humanitarian entrants was increased to 16,250 in 2017-18. Most of these newly-arrived refugee families settled in New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and Queensland.

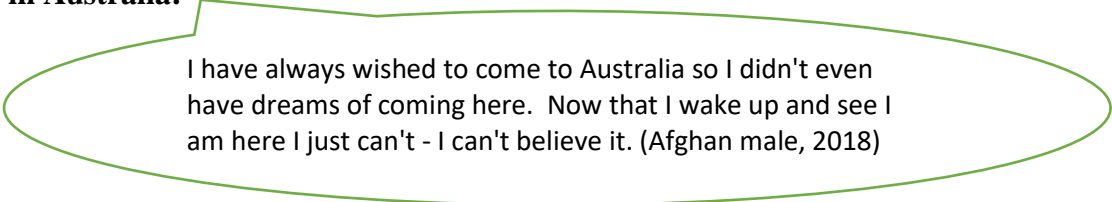
As part of a study on Settlement Outcomes of Refugee Families in Australia, funded by the Australian Research Council, and led by Professor Jock Collins (University of Technology Sydney), Professor Carol Reid (Western Sydney University), and Associate Professor Dimitria Groutsis (University of Sydney), the first of three years of data collection has been completed. We interviewed and surveyed newly arrived refugee families from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq and in four metropolitan and two regional sites in New South Wales: Auburn, Parramatta, Liverpool, and Fairfield in metropolitan Western Sydney; and Coffs Harbour and Wollongong in regional NSW.

The report provides a snapshot of the findings of our fieldwork in the area covered by our partner in Auburn. We acknowledge the critical support of Settlement Services International (SSI) Ltd, a partner in the research, who guided us in approaching one of their partner organisations, and Auburn Diversity Services Inc (ADSI), for assistance in finding refugee families as participants. ADSI identified **19 Afghan families** who became participants in Auburn: a location identified as a settlement zone for refugees from Afghanistan. In 2018, these families were interviewed, mainly in their homes and they provided valuable insights into their settlement experiences. In these Auburn families, **37 adults and 27 young people** participated in interviews and completed an accompanying online survey. The survey is informed by the national BNLA longitudinal survey of refugees in Australia in order to ensure benchmarking with the survey instrument used for the purposes of this study. This snapshot identifies some of the respondent's hopes, opinions and concerns about their settlement.

Broad themes emerging from the interviews with the Auburn family members included:

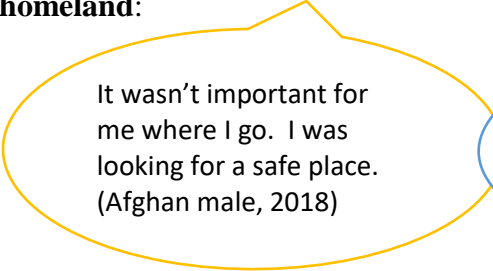
- Coming to Australia
- English language skills
- Access to and participation in employment
- The local area / neighbourhood
- Bringing up children / education
- Social integration / belonging
- Future plans

Starting a new life in a new land is difficult. **Yet all of the Auburn family members were happy to be in Australia:**

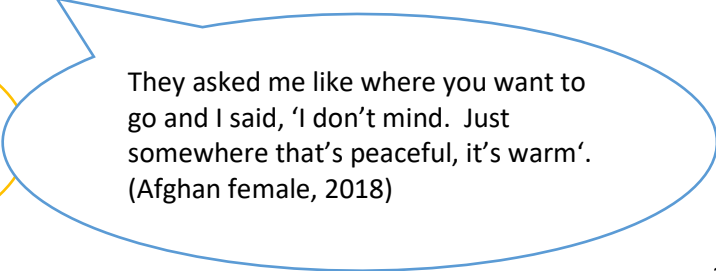


I have always wished to come to Australia so I didn't even have dreams of coming here. Now that I wake up and see I am here I just can't - I can't believe it. (Afghan male, 2018)

**For some, the location did not matter as long as they could leave behind conflict in their homeland:**



It wasn't important for me where I go. I was looking for a safe place. (Afghan male, 2018)



They asked me like where you want to go and I said, 'I don't mind. Just somewhere that's peaceful, it's warm'. (Afghan female, 2018)

The importance of **English language skills** to refugee families was clear, both in order to communicate and interact with others in their new neighbourhoods and to get an education or a job. **Learning the English language for adults and children can be very difficult. Many of the Afghan family members had little education in their home country and could not read or write in their own language, making it even more difficult to learn a foreign language.**

**In addition, some family members could not attend English classes outside their home due to disability or caring responsibilities. They wanted to learn English at home:**

Yes, I like to go to a school, but because of my son, I couldn't go.  
(Afghan female, 2018)

I want to learn, and I am willing to learn, and it would be great for me if someone could come.  
(Afghan female, 2018)

We'd really like it if someone could come and help in here because of my kids. So I would prefer that over going somewhere else.  
(Afghan male, 2018, father of two disabled children)

**The elderly also have particular difficulties learning English:**

I am happy with the teachers. They are doing their best. But, as I am of an older age, I can't really understand that well, and I forget what I studied last week. When I get to next week, I forget what last week's lesson was. (Afghan male, 2018)

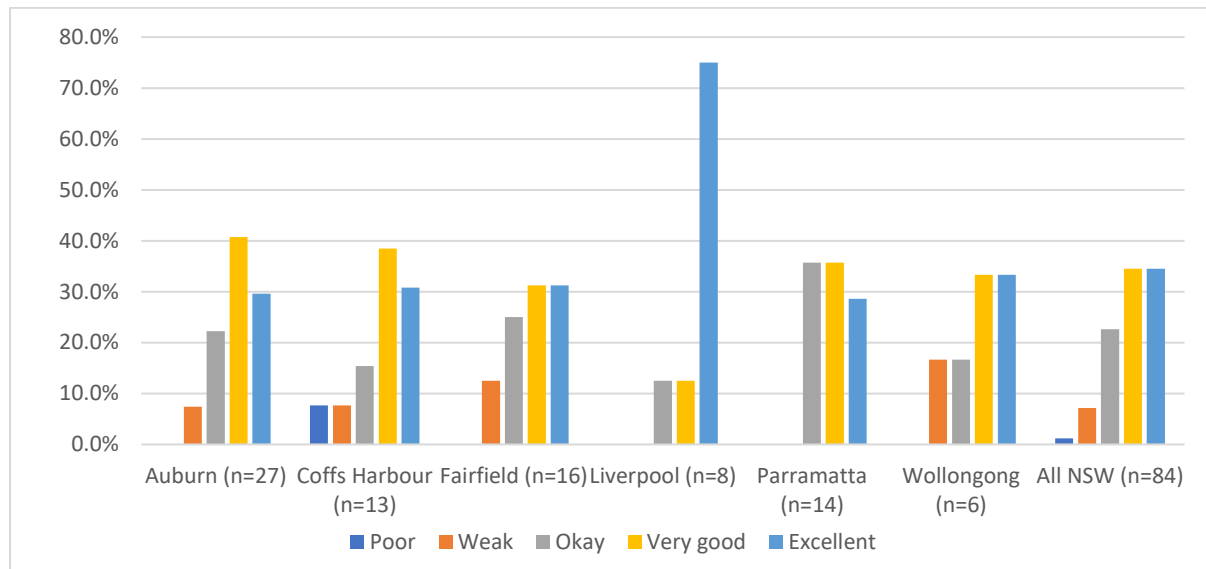
**Learning English in a formal setting can also present challenges, particularly for young adults where issues of identity and racism come into play. One 20-year-old male was not supported by his class mates at school:**

Sometimes our English is not very good, and they make jokes about that. For example, I had a presentation for my assessment in class. There was a boy who was laughing at me because of my accent. He made me a bit nervous about my presentation and I couldn't do very well with my speech. After that, I went to the teacher and said it's not fair that they're laughing at me and why do they have to be like this. That is not helping me. I was really ready, and I studied really well, and I made the assessment really good. I was sure that I would get 100 percent for that. But, because of that boy, my assessment was bad.  
(Young Afghan male, 2018)

We asked the cohort of young people in Auburn, Parramatta, Liverpool, Fairfield, Coffs Harbour and Wollongong who were refugees from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq to rate their English language listening ability as ‘poor’, ‘weak’, ‘okay’, ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’.

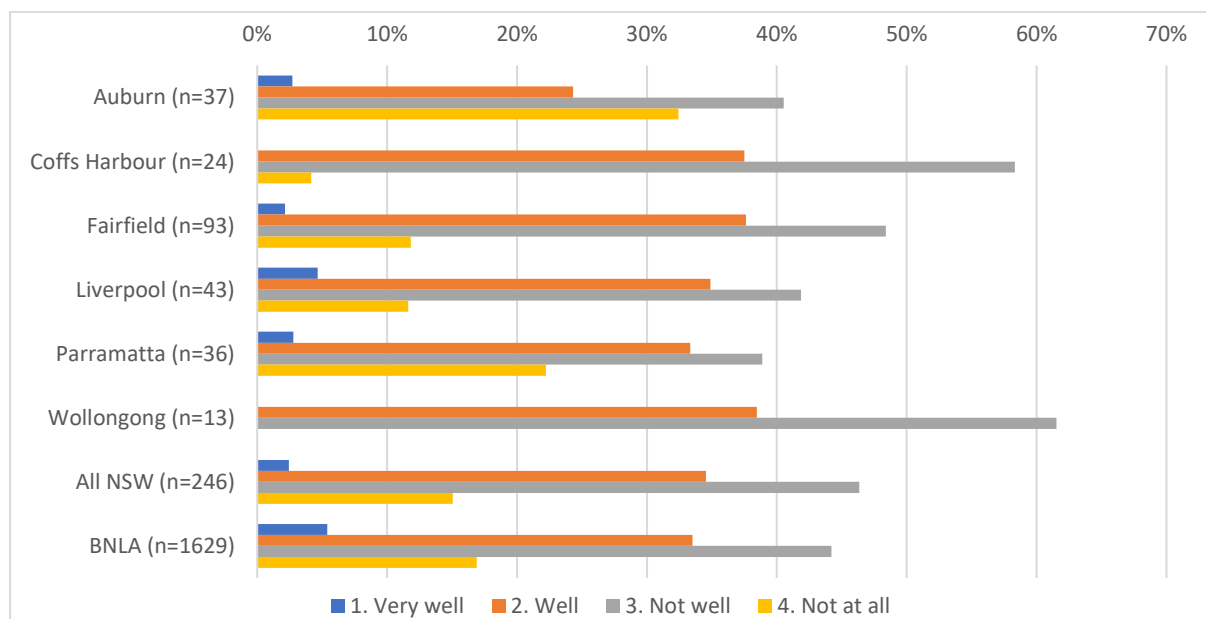
**Young people in Auburn were particularly skilled in understanding spoken English: 70% of the young people in Auburn assessed their listening ability as ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’, which was slightly higher than the percentage for the whole of the NSW cohort (69%) (Figure 1).**

Figure 1: NSW young people: ability to understand spoken English



We also asked the adults in the NSW cohort of newly arrived Afghan, Syrian, and Iraqi refugees whether they could speak English ‘very well’, ‘well’, ‘not well’ or ‘not at all’. **The proportion of adults in Auburn who assessed themselves as being able to speak English ‘very well’ or ‘well’ (27%), was lower than the proportion of refugees who made that assessment in all other locations and in the national BNLA survey (39%) (Figure 2). This was a reflection of the inability of many of the Auburn family members, in particular, to interact with the community, due to disability and advanced age.**

Figure 2: NSW adults: How well do you speak English?



BNLA = Building a New Life in Australia (The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants)

**A lack of English language skills was a frustrating barrier to employment, as one of the Auburn adults explained:**

I'm going to school but I can't understand anything. They send me to jobseeker to find a job but I can't understand anything. How can I find a job? (Afghan female, 2018)

For adult refugees generally - and for those in Auburn more specifically - getting a job in Australia is an important priority. Since this was the first year of settlement in Australia for most of the NSW refugees interviewed/surveyed, most of them had not yet found employment because most were still learning English and settling into their life in Australia. Notably, employment outcomes for the recently arrived refugees in NSW were less positive than for those refugees surveyed in the national BNLA survey. We will follow these same families over the next two years and hope to see these employment results improve greatly. **Of the groups interviewed in NSW, those in Auburn, Fairfield and Wollongong were most likely not to be in employment (Figure 3).**

Figure 3: NSW adults and employment



**Some of the Auburn family members interviewed were not seeking work due to disability or illness. Without English skills, the kind of work mostly available is manual labour:**

Yes, my husband is working at the moment. Construction. Yes, my father too. In construction. Yeah, they are happy. But, the job they do is quite difficult. But, because they have language difficulties with English – they have never learned before – they are just trying to get it. That's why the job is so hard. They can do it, but because of the language they have to do it. Yeah, they can't change jobs. (Young Afghan female, 2018)

I would like to seek employment once I learn the language, but something that's very easy and not hard lifting is required. (Afghan male, 2018)

**Some found work through connections to the Afghan community:**

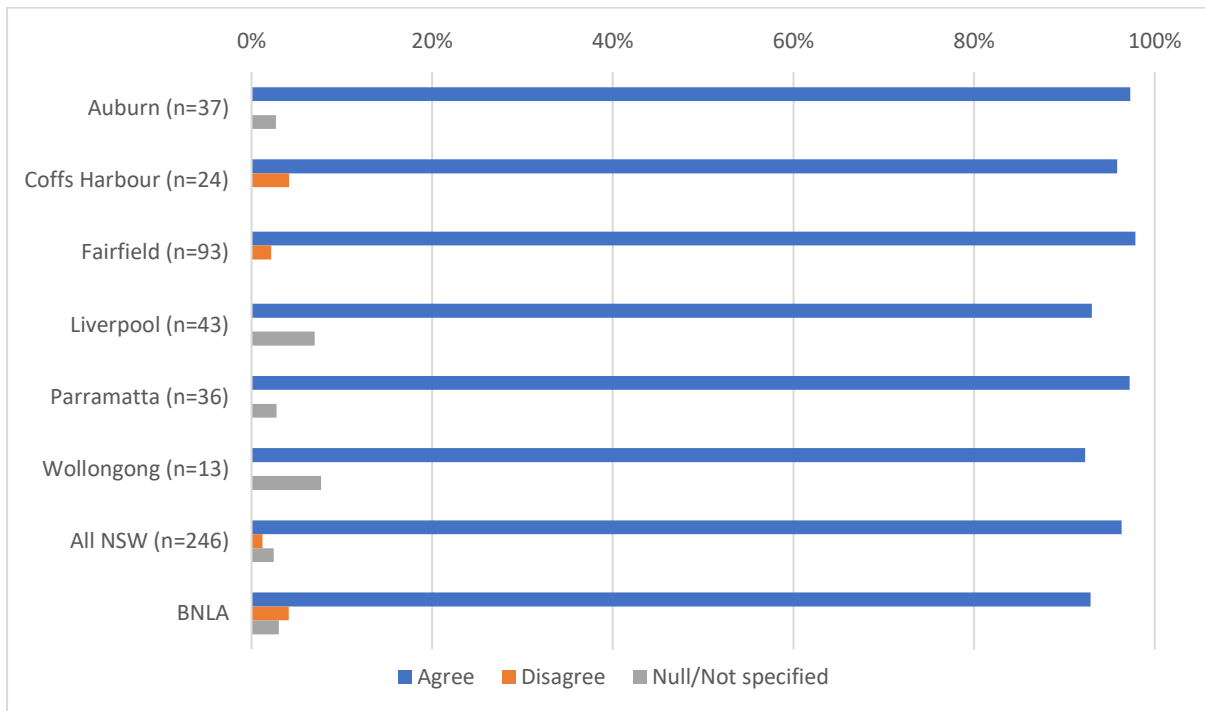
It was very hard for me to find a job, at first. But, through my references and having Afghan friends, I found a job. (Young Afghan male, 2018)

**Finding work is especially hard for older people:**

Australia is very good place for all of people but unfortunately I came to Australia very late. Now I'm older. I'm very old. I have pain and I can't do anything. (Elderly Afghan male, 2018)

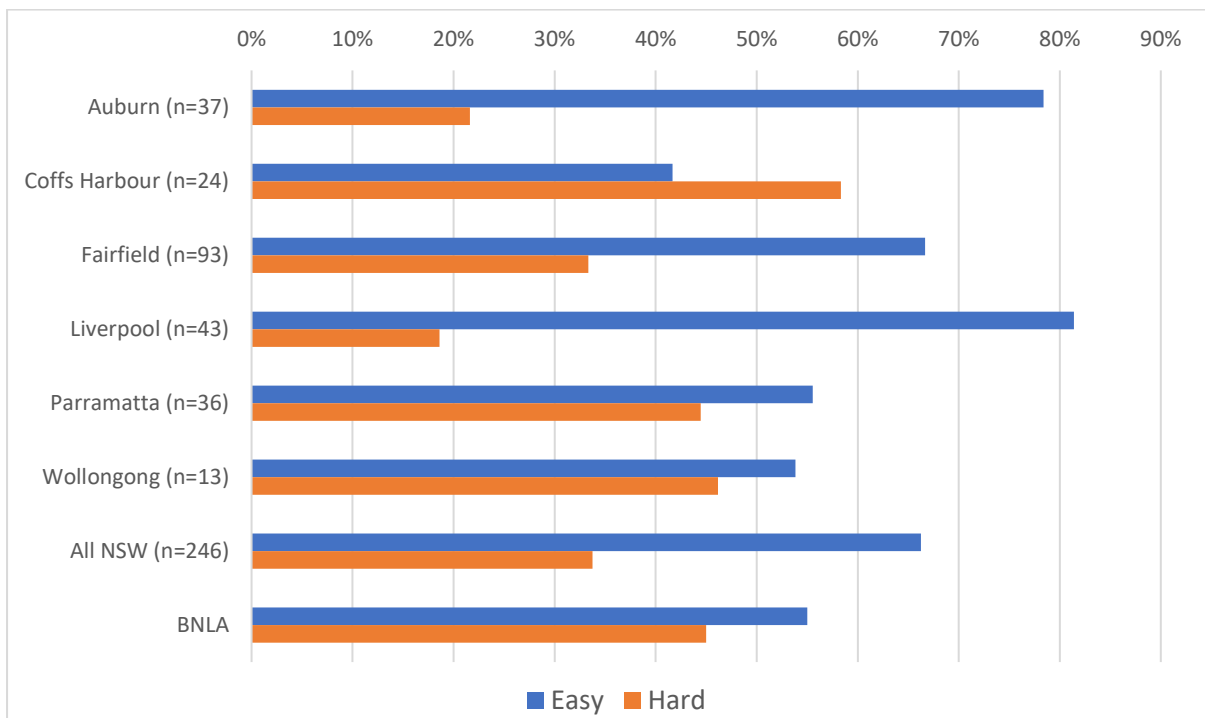
One of the key reasons that refugees come to Australia is to find a safe environment to bring up their families. **Every one of the adult family members in Auburn, who responded to the question (97%), felt safe living there (Figure 4).**

Figure 4: NSW adults: I feel safe in my neighbourhood



**And most were able to establish friendships: four out of five (78%) of the adults interviewed in Auburn said that it was easy to make friends in Australia (Figure 5). This was a significantly higher proportion of respondents than that recorded by the national BNLA survey (55%).**

Figure 5: NSW Adults: How easy have you found it to make friends?



Most of the Auburn families – both adult and young refugees – felt at home in Australia, but some said that they felt lonely, even though there is a large Afghan community in and around Auburn. Often due to disability, a large number of Auburn refugees were not able to leave their own homes and this made them especially isolated.

Moreover, although they felt they belonged in Australia, many missed their homeland. Some were confused, particularly the young people:

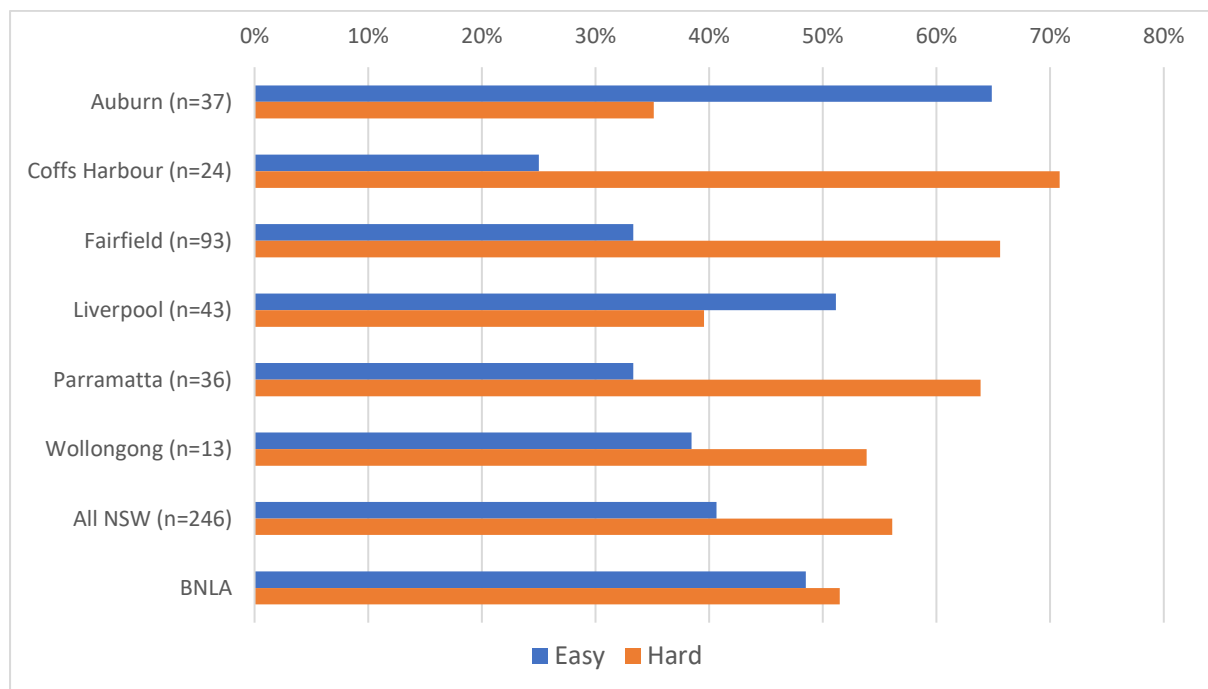
My parents Afghan. We was born - we were born Iran. Now we are here, you know. I'm confused about anything - our home, about our country, you know. (Young Afghan male, 2018)

On the other hand, one woman expressed her relief that her disabled children were truly accepted here:

I prefer Australians much more because they give love to my kids. They don't humiliate me or my kids. Being in Afghanistan, my kids were always isolated, alone in the sand, playing by themselves which made me cry. Here people say hello to my kids whereas if this was in Afghanistan, they would say things which were hurtful. (Afghan female, 2018; mother of two disabled children)

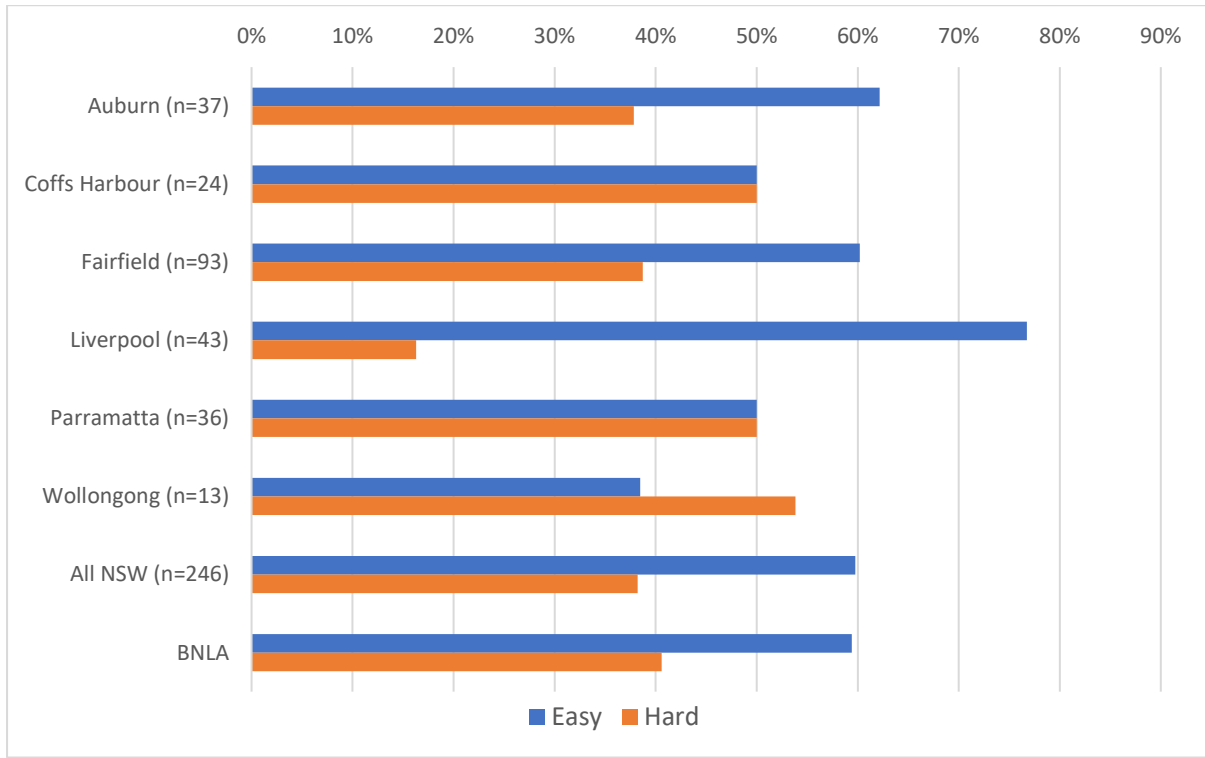
**It is very different living in Australia than in the Middle East, yet after one to two years of settlement, three out of five adult family members living in Auburn (65%) said that it was easy to talk to their Australian neighbours (Figure 6). This too was a significantly higher result than that recorded by the national BNLA survey (49%).**

Figure 6: NSW adults : How easy has it been to talk to your Australian neighbours?



**In addition, families were adjusting to Australian culture: three out of five adults (62%) said that they found it easy to understand the Australian way of life, again a slightly higher proportion than that recorded by the BNLA survey (59%) (Figure 7).**

Figure 7: NSW adults and understanding Australian ways



One significant difference in Australia was the ability to gain an education. This was especially so for females. With little opportunity for education or training, the women in the Auburn cohort had fulfilled traditional roles as wives and mothers in their home country and so had no employment experience. Moving to Australia has provided an opportunity for young females in the Auburn families, along with their brothers, to go to school and potentially from there to go into any field of employment. Young women expressed positive attitudes towards their future in Australia, a future that they had never thought was possible.

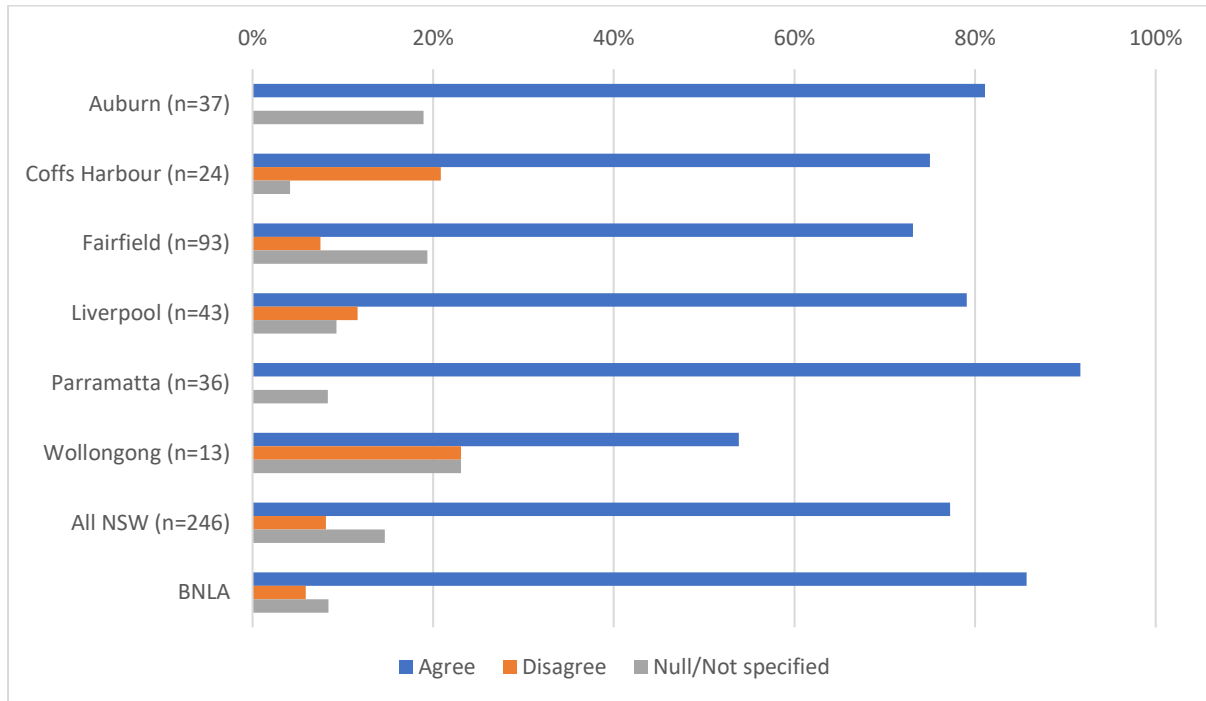
The 20-year-old daughter in one of the Auburn families commented on how gender differences in education in Australia do not exist and how she could now make her own decisions:

Even boys and girls, there were many differences between boys and girls, but in here, I cannot find any differences. You know? Everybody is having the equal life... Actually, from now, I can decide my future, you know? If I want to be a doctor, I can be, because government will support us. Even they will make us doctor. So even if you want to be engineer, nurse, anything, anyone; so they can support us. (Young Afghan female, 2018)



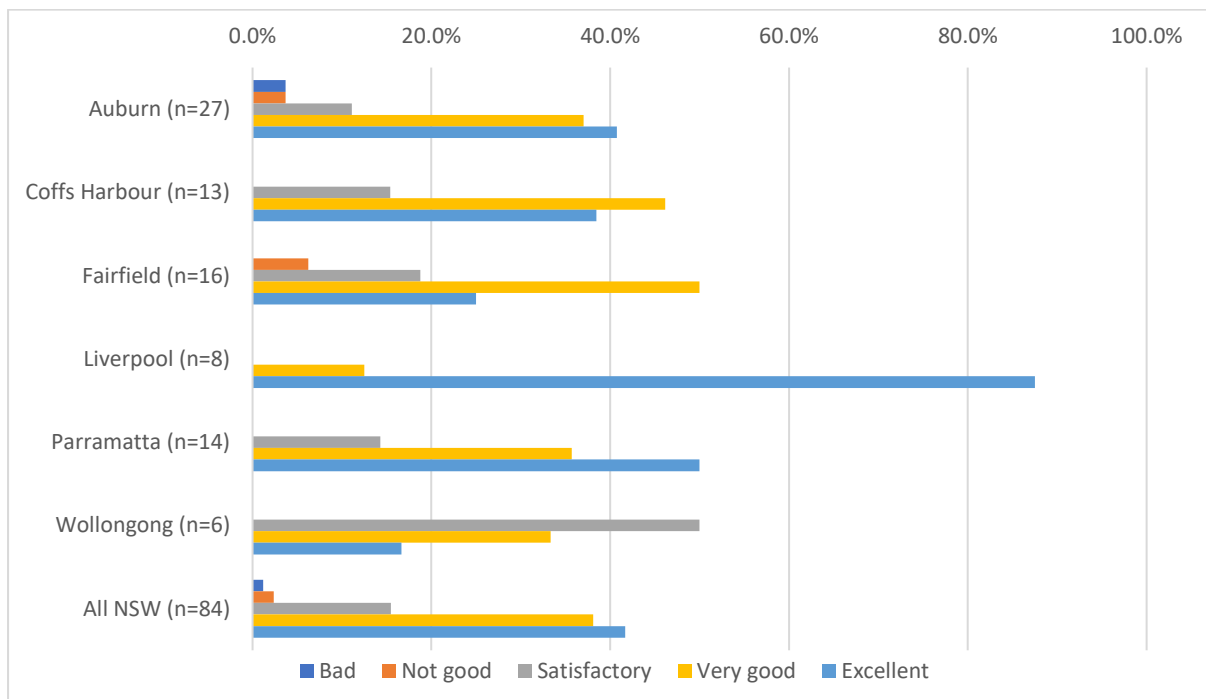
**All refugees want their children to have a good future in Australia. The adults in the Auburn families were confident about their children’s education: all of those who responded to the question about schools (81%) agreed that the Auburn schools were good (Figure 8).**

Figure 8: NSW adults: My neighbourhood has good schools for my children



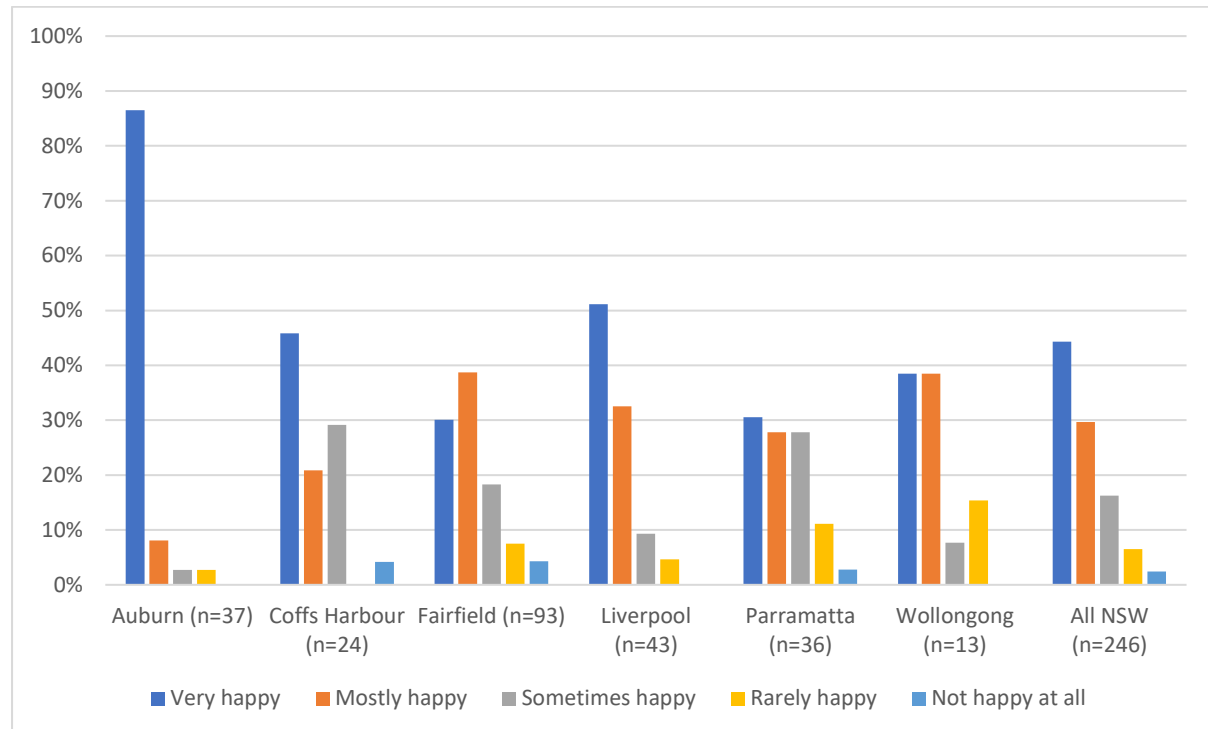
**They will be happy that four out of five young people living in Auburn (78%) thought that their school or TAFE was ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’ which was only slightly lower than the percentage for the whole of the NSW cohort (80%) (Figure 9).**

Figure 9: NSW young people: How is school/TAFE?



***Moving your family to a new country is difficult, particularly when you are escaping war and conflict. Nevertheless, when asked how happy they were with life in Australia, an overwhelming nine out of ten adults in the Auburn cohort (94%) were ‘very’ or ‘mostly’ happy with their life now (Figure 10). This was a far greater proportion than the average for NSW (74%) or for refugees in any of the other NSW locations.***

Figure 10: NSW adults: how happy are you with your current life in Australia?



The hopes of many of the Auburn family members for the future were to settle into their own home:

We'd like to own our house in a peaceful neighbourhood where we're at peace ourselves. (Afghan male, 2018)

However young people worried about their financial situation, not being able to save anything, which makes buying a house very hard:

It's not enough. No, it's not enough for us, because we have to pay rent and bills or something like that. We can't save any money. (Young Afghan male, 2018)

Although happy in Australia, almost all of the Auburn families still had somebody back in Afghanistan, or in neighbouring Pakistan, who they wanted to sponsor to come to Australia. The most pressing cases were of adult children, who were not allowed to be on the initial visa application. Many families awaited decisions from courts to find out whether they could bring these loved ones to Australia. Tightening of Citizenship laws were also mentioned by Auburn families as a concern since all of them hoped for Australian citizenship, expressing wishes to go back to their home country to visit, but believing that Australia is now their home.

## CONCLUSION

All of the newly-arrived Afghan refugees in Auburn were very thankful for the opportunity that Australia provided for them of a safe haven. They were very confident that Australia would provide a great future for their families, although through disability or caring responsibilities many were not able to work.

The Auburn families comprised some who had been sponsored by relatives living in Australia and some who had not, so were arriving in a new land where they had no formal or informal community connections. Government assistance is limited for those who are sponsored, and that group were generally helped by their relatives or through their Community Support Program (CSP) to find accommodation and sometimes employment, although individuals in this group with complex needs could be eligible for government Specialised and Intensive Services (SIS). Those who were not sponsored were satisfied and appreciative of the on-arrival services provided to them and their families by Settlement Services International. SSI found them accommodation, linked them to welfare services and guided them through the difficult first months of settlement in NSW. All of the Auburn family members were entitled to English language classes and these were also arranged by SSI. This was even though SSI had more than double the normal number of refugee arrivals in 2017 when most of the families that we interviewed arrived.

Most of the newly-arrived refugees in Auburn had had little access to education in Afghanistan: many of the males had worked as skilled manual labourers, such as in farming, and with age or disability now had difficulty securing work. However, some males were out working to support their families at the time that their mother or wife was interviewed. Many of the women had large numbers of children, or disabled children to care for, but looked forward to being able to learn English and get a job. Those with injuries and disabilities were extremely grateful for access to health care in Australia. Those who could attend classes were keen to be learning English so that they could get work and contribute to their new society.

Some refugees in Auburn had a good command of English, particularly the young people, many of whom travelled to attend an Intensive English Centre. However, many adults did not have good English skills. Generally they attended TAFE courses which provided 510 hours of English Language tuition, but those with children or other caring responsibilities could not get to these classes easily. Attending English classes provided them with an opportunity to make new friends in Australia. However, there was a concern that the English courses were not tailored to the different language abilities and needs of the different refugee arrivals. An added frustration was that they could not look for employment or accept employment opportunities while learning English due to the lack of flexibility in the language tuition.

**We will revisit these families in 2019 and 2020 to trace these families' settlement journey in NSW.**

**We thank them for opening their doors and their hearts to us. We also thank SSI and ADSI for all the help that they provided in this research project and for the bilingual refugees who assisted in this research project as bilingual research assistants.**