

MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS AND SERVICE ACCESS AMONG ASYLUM SEEKERS IN BIRMINGHAM:

INSIGHTS FROM FOCUS GROUP ENGAGEMENT

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## ABOUT MIGRATION POLICY AND PRACTICE

We exist to provide strategic support to the voluntary and community sector in the region, for any organisation working with migrants.

Our aim is to support collaborative working through the development of the West Midlands Migration Network, allowing organisations to come together and discuss joint working to address key priorities.

### OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

Our Coordinator role is funded as part of Birmingham City Council's Sanctuary Grant Scheme

The role has two distinct strands, providing support to individuals as well as increasing the strategic coordination of activity in the sector. Primarily working with asylum seekers in the city, but also linking with wider migrant populations, build relationships and trust to understand their needs around mental health support, providing referrals to clinical services where appropriate.

We also link with other organisations to offer a regular series of social activities held at local community venues within walking distance of accommodation.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Asylum seekers face complex and multifaceted challenges when living in temporary accommodation. The combination of legal uncertainty, poor living conditions, language barriers, lack of access to education and employment, and emotional distress has created a precarious situation for many individuals. Mental health struggles are particularly severe, with participants experiencing anxiety, depression, and social isolation. The inability to work exacerbates feelings of helplessness, while cultural barriers and systemic gaps further hinder integration efforts.

Despite these difficulties, many asylum seekers display remarkable resilience and determination. Their aspirations to build stable, self-sufficient lives and contribute to society highlight the urgent need for policy improvements and enhanced support services. The data suggests that targeted interventions could significantly improve their well-being and prospects.

Asylum seekers in the UK face significant structural and psychological challenges, yet their resilience and aspirations demonstrate their potential to contribute positively to society. The UK's commitment to human rights and refugee protection must translate into practical measures that ensure the dignity, safety, and well-being of those seeking refuge. By addressing the systemic barriers identified in this report, we can help both asylum seekers and society.

# PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

The focus groups involved 45 asylum seekers currently residing in temporary hotel accommodation in Birmingham.

The participants were at various stages of the asylum process, with most awaiting initial decisions on their applications, while a few had lodged appeals and were awaiting outcomes. Participants were recruited from diverse cultural and national backgrounds to ensure the inclusion of varied perspectives and experiences.

In order to protect anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, and age ranges were used rather than specific ages. Age was considered a relevant factor in understanding mental health and well-being as it influences individual experiences and coping mechanisms. Participants represented a broad spectrum of age groups.

The cultural diversity of the group was notable, with participants originating from South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The regional breakdown is as follows:

• South Asia: 19 participants (42%)

Africa: 15 participants (33%)

• Middle East: 11 participants (24%)

Participants from Russia and Central Europe were approached but showed reluctance to engage in interviews or social activities, often declining participation.

## FINDINGS AND THEMES

#### LIVING CONDITIONS

I have moved three times in the last six months. It is hard to feel settled when you are always packing and unpacking

Many participants stated that the main reason for their depression was a fear of being moved to a new place every 2 or 3 months. They had little desire to leave their hotel and didn't want to explore the surrounding area, feeling that there was no point in knowing a place when you are not going to live here.

"I don't understand why they keep moving people from one place to another. It's not easy to get accustomed to a new area, especially when you don't know the language."

Participants also noted that poor living conditions, such as overcrowded spaces and lack of access to basic amenities, affected their wellbeing. Out of 45 participants, 37 participants highlighted poor living conditions as a significant source of stress and anxiety. Men felt more depressed because of the lack of facilities for shaving and haircutting available for them, and they felt that barbers here charged more than the amount they received weekly.

I'm feeling down because I can't afford to shave my head and beard. I don't have the money to buy a beard trimmer, and I'm not allowed to work. Looking at myself in the mirror, I don't feel like myself anymore.

Many asylum seekers who arrived on small boats were in high need of warm clothes and other basic needs. They were also in need of basic products to support their health and hygiene.

"I have nothing to wear. I need warm clothes and due to a sense of shame I don't want to go outside from my room."

Overcrowding, inadequate facilities and lack of privacy were frequently mentioned. Several participants noted that while accommodation was appreciated as free and safe, practical difficulties persisted. For example, one participant described the challenge of accessing meals due to their pregnant wife's inability to use stairs, due to a lack of a lift in their hotel.

Another participant expressed distress over inadequate food quality, noting that meat was often undercooked or spoiled, leading them to skip meals. Families with young children expressed concerns about the lack of appropriate food for their children.

Our daughter is 20 months old, and she doesn't want to sit in the room all day. She gets irritated, and we end up giving her a mobile phone so she can watch cartoons. I know it's not good for her, but we have no other option

Single women fleeing domestic violence shared that they felt safer in the hotel but still struggled with isolation and poor food quality. "

"The food is not suitable for me because I am diabetic. Sometimes I skip meals because I can't eat the oily and spicy food served here."

Many people who had arrived here on small boats found the hotels and facilities very good, and they felt safer and more comfortable while living in this accomodation. Although at the same time, few people thought that the living standards in Birmingham hotels were better than those they had been been placed in elsewhere in the UK.

"I am living in a very good hotel, which feels like a dream come true. They have provided me with a comfortable bed and free meals. What more could one ask for? I feel like I am living like a king here."

#### **DAILY LIFE**

I want to do something meaningful with my time, but it is hard to find opportunities when you are waiting for a decision

Daily routines varied among participants, but many expressed frustrations over having limited activities and feeling isolated. Some participants found meaning in volunteer work or community engagement, while others felt their days were monotonous and lacked purpose.

It was observed that many participants felt there was little to do in their daily routines, which contributed to feelings of depression. They often found themselves preoccupied with their application status and repeatedly inquired about when they would receive an interview call from the Home Office.

"Most of the people I'm staying with spend their time either on their mobile phones or sleeping, which doesn't seem like a healthy way to live."

Few participants actively sought to engage in different activities, feeling uncertain about their future decisions, which led them to hesitate in getting involved in new activities or familiarizing themselves with their surroundings.

This environment is very isolating, and the lack of support is challenging. However, visits from charity organisations provide much-needed assistance and help us cope with our stress. This support is truly valuable

A few participants shared that they felt uplifted when charity organisations visited them. They learned a lot from these interactions and eagerly anticipated the organisations' next visits. Many expressed that these charity organisations helped them connect with others facing similar stressors and challenges, which gave them a sense of belonging and reduced feelings of isolation.

The lack of structured daily activities has contributed to feelings of hopelessness and anxiety among many individuals. Several have expressed dissatisfaction with the food provided at the hotels, stating that it does not meet their dietary requirements.

Some individuals shared that they used to visit their places of worship in order to eat specific foods, and many have reported skipping meals due to depression and a lack of appetite.

A few expressed that the fixed mealtimes prevent them from engaging in outside activities and that the strict monitoring makes them feel as if they are living in jail.

#### LANGUAGE BARRIERS

I want to learn English, but there are not enough classes available. When you are unable to express yourself, you feel lost

Language barriers emerged as a significant challenge for many participants who reported difficulties in accessing services, communicating with healthcare providers, and integrating into the community.

Few participants indicated that where language classes were available at hotels this was sufficient to meet their needs. Most classes comprised of a one-hour session per week, which did not provide enough time for immersive learning with an instructor.

Participants emphasised the need for more language support to enhance their ability to navigate daily life and reduce feelings of isolation. Some expressed reluctance to attend English classes because they feared being ridiculed for their language skills.

They will find me silly and make fun of me. I am not educated, so I don't speak at all in my English language class

In the hotels, many participants had a low level of formal education, which contributed to their reluctance to attend classes. They felt ashamed of their inability to express their true feelings. This situation has led to feelings of depression, and they often hesitated to share their emotions with anyone.

"My inability to speak English is a significant barrier. Additionally, my lack of education makes expressing what I want to say challenging."

Many participants stated that they could not speak English and required someone to translate their messages. Some reported that their asylum application data was incorrectly filed due to poor translation by interpreters.

"I need someone to translate everything for me, just like I am doing now. When you asked me for an interview, I was fearful because I worried I might not answer your questions correctly."

Language barriers were identified as a common source of stress, contributing to mental health issues among asylum seekers. Many feared that during their Home Office asylum interview, they would be unable to express their thoughts accurately and that interpreters might misinterpret their statements, potentially jeopardising their applications.

I felt disappointed when the translator misinterpreted my case. Now, I am determined to improve my English so that I can express my feelings and needs without relying on anyone else

Many domestic violence survivors expressed that their language barriers prevented them from seeking help from the police, making it challenging for them to reach out for assistance.

"My language barrier has caused me a lot of suffering. My husband and in-laws knew that I couldn't speak English, and they subjected me to domestic violence, which I endured in silence."

#### **FUTURE STATUS AND UNCERTAINTY**

Not knowing what will happen to you is the worst. You cannot plan your future when everything is uncertain

Many participants were experiencing mental health issues stemming from uncertainties about their future. Factors such as moving frequently, living in temporary or shared accommodations, and uncertainty regarding their asylum status contributed significantly to their anxiety.

As a result of these uncertainties, participants showed little interest in activities organised to engage them and promote healthy living. Many expressed concerns about the duration of the asylum process and its impact on their mental health.

Many participants expressed that they were more concerned about the outcomes of their applications, which added to their stress and made it difficult for them to engage in any activities. Most reported difficulties sleeping due to this fear.

When those riots happened, I changed my appearance and that of my wife as well. I shaved my beard, and now we wear Western outfits to protect ourselves from those who hate us

uncertainty often led to feelings hopelessness and fear about the Participants discussed how various incidents and policies adversely affected them and contributed to their concerns for future security, including riots that occurred against asylum seekers living in hotels. These events deeply impacted them; many felt scared and reported that during that period, they remained in their hotels, hesitant to go outside. A few experienced panic attacks, and due to stress, they struggled to sleep.

Many participants used focus groups to express their feelings about the riots. They mentioned that they often felt unable to express themselves but wanted to use this platform to share their desire to live peacefully in the community.

"These riots have shown that many people here harbour animosity towards us. I'm uncertain about what will happen next. I want to express that we desire to live here peacefully and have no intention of harming anyone."

#### ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

One of the best aspects of the UK is that, although we cannot work, we are allowed to learn new skills and even gain admission to college for free

There were mixed views regarding how access to education and employment opportunities significantly impacted mental health. Some participants expressed happiness about the opportunity to learn new skills for free in the UK, believing this could help them in the future. They appreciated that, despite their immigration status, they were permitted to study the English language and attend college without any charge.

However, many professionals found the inability to work in the UK to be a source of depression. Living on benefits and relying on free food and services was disheartening for them. They wanted permission to work so that they could earn a respectable income. Some participants felt that their self-esteem suffered because they depended on others for their living.

## I was a teacher in my country, but here I cannot work. It is frustrating because I want to contribute

The lack of opportunities to engage in meaningful work or education led to feelings of worthlessness and frustration. Many participants wanted to work to support themselves, expressing difficulty in depending on benefits and living with limited resources while capable of earning a living.

A few participants mentioned that the prohibition on working was a root cause of depression for many asylum seekers living in hotels, emphasising that idleness contributed to their mental health struggles.

It became evident that many asylum seekers were eager to learn new skills and the English language but were largely unaware of how to apply for educational programs or what skills would be beneficial for their employment prospects.

"I believe that awareness sessions about the facilities available to asylum applicants would be very helpful, not only for me but for many others."

Several individuals expressed a desire for orientation sessions upon their arrival to learn about available courses and steps to seek employment opportunities while waiting for their asylum applications.

There is no guidance on where to find information about the courses and their details. I aspire to have a respectable job, but I am not allowed to work. If the government permits us to work, it will help us combat our fears and stress

A few participants, despite being new and unable to apply for courses at that moment, were still eager to learn about available opportunities.

"I am eager to pursue education, but I'm currently ineligible to apply. I am enthusiastic about acquiring new skills and knowledge; however, I have been informed that I cannot apply for anything at this time. This is quite frustrating for me."

Asylum seekers with low literacy or no formal education offered different perspectives regarding education and job opportunities. Many were hesitant to participate in activities designed for asylum seekers, while they expressed a willingness to take on manual labour jobs, awaiting the permitted working status.

"I am illiterate. How can I get admission here? I feel too old to go to school, and I don't want to make a fool of myself. I just want to earn some money. Right now, I am not allowed to work, but I want to work."

I don't know where to go or who can help me find employment. I am not seeking a high-level job; I am willing to do any work to earn a respectable living here

Participants indicated that they were unaware that they could learn skills or do volunteer work while waiting for their asylum applications to be processed. They suggested that awareness sessions about job finding and crafting CVs would be beneficial in the future.

#### **EMOTIONAL WELLBEING**

I am worried about the possibility of deportation. Because of that, it is hard for me to sleep and eat,"

Participants shared a variety of emotional challenges, including feelings of sadness, anxiety, and isolation. Many reported struggling to adjust to the asylum process while dealing with past traumas.

Many individuals experience constant pressure and anxiety due to fears of deportation and the potential rejection of their asylum applications. Some participants, particularly men, exhibited aggressive moods and misbehaved, even towards support staff. This stress is contributing to additional behavioural challenges.

Many participants highlighted the importance of emotional support, such as counselling services, in helping them cope with these challenges. They expressed that they struggled to manage such stress, which often led to serious mental health issues.

I am unsure about how to visit a GP.
The Brushstrokes team has assisted
me in registering with a GP, but
whenever I receive a call for an
appointment, Serco does not help me
with travel arrangements, causing me
to miss my appointments

Pregnant women expressed heightened mental health concerns and were often reluctant to share their feelings. Some had experienced racism while addressing their mental health issues, which, in certain cases, resulted in abortions. One participant shared her fear of visiting a GP.

"I often feel harassed. My midwife always makes racist comments toward me. I am scared now."

It was noted that many pregnant women were suffering from postnatal depression. A few requested mental health support, while others voiced their fears.

"I worry about what will happen if social services take my children away from me. I feel scared and depressed and don't want to share my true feelings with anyone."

The unavailability of local cuisine was another significant challenge faced by many asylum seekers. They were unfamiliar with the food provided in the hotel and were not allowed to cook for themselves. Due to financial constraints, they could not purchase their food.

The fear and stress often make me cry, which disturbs those around me. I feel alone and sometimes ashamed.

There are times when I feel like ending my life

Most participants shared that they missed their families and felt unable to discuss their challenges with them as they did not want to cause worry. This lack of family connection made them more vulnerable to mental health issues.

"Adjusting to the local cuisine has been challenging, as it often upsets my stomach and makes me feel feverish. Unfortunately, I have no choice but to eat what is available. The strict meal timings here are difficult to adhere to. Missing a mealtime means going without food until the next scheduled time. These challenges are significantly impacting my well-being."

#### SENSE OF SAFETY AND SECURITY

Other incidents show that people hate us. That makes me feel self-conscious, and I avoid going to places where I sense hostility

Most participants felt safe while staying in the hotel; however, after the 2024 summer riots, they expressed concerns about their safety and protection. Feeling secure was a priority for them, but many reported feeling unsafe in their current accommodations or communities. Some participants shared worries about being discriminated against or facing hostility due to their status as asylum seekers.

Participants emphasised the need for more secure housing and community support to improve their sense of safety. Additionally, asylum seekers from backgrounds of domestic violence felt protected in their current environment. The presence of security guards provided them with a sense of protection from their partners or husbands.

They mentioned that upon their arrival, the police informed Serco about their situation and provided them with police contacts for emergencies, which contributed to their sense of safety.

This is a safe place. The UK government provided me with protection from a cruel man when I was all alone, and I feel safe here

Conversely, individuals with families living in hotels found these accommodations to be a source of stress and mental health concerns. Women who were pregnant or had children found it particularly challenging to live in a hotel with many restrictions. They were deeply concerned about the mental health of their children.

"I feel safe here in the hotel, but I worry about my teenage son. He has faced a few racist comments while playing cricket and has been bullied by other boys in the playground, which is a major concern for me."

Several participants voiced their fears about going to public places where they sometimes faced mistreatment and racist comments.

"I was in the post office, standing in line, when a group of men came in, pushed me to the floor, and shouted, 'Go back to your country.'"

Overall, many participants shared that they had experienced very difficult situations, and upon arriving in the UK, they felt a sense of protection.

"The UK Border Force rescued me from the sea when I was about to die. An officer tapped my shoulder and said, 'You are safe now. Welcome to the UK.' That day, I realised what human rights meant, and I truly felt protected here."

#### **FUTURE ASPIRATIONS**

I want a safe and peaceful future for my children. Once my asylum status is approved, I will focus on my children's education. I want them to live a happy and safe life

Many participants expressed confusion about the asylum process, particularly regarding how long it would take and how to prepare for their interviews. The restriction on their right to work was frequently cited as a significant cause of mental health struggles. Many emphasized that being unable to work and contribute to society increased their feelings of frustration and helplessness. The majority were not aware of the steps involved in the asylum application process or how long it might take.

None of those spoken to were informed that welcome package information provided on arrival in hotels was available in multiple languages.

Despite the challenges they faced, participants expressed hopes and dreams for the future. Many shared aspirations of building a stable life, finding meaningful work, and contributing to society.

I want to start my career as a musician. I plan to apply for admission to a college to pursue this path professionally.

Young people, in particular, were more assertive about their future and related career plans.

A few participants noted that staying in hotels allowed them to meet people from different cultures. This was a valuable chance to learn about others, which they previously had not experienced. They were open to understanding different cultures and tried to integrate into society by volunteering.

Participants also expressed concerns about the possibility of their asylum applications being rejected, which added to their stress and uncertainty. Some had faced rejection of their asylum applications, while others had experienced detention and were going through depression, making them less optimistic about their futures.

"I fear what will happen if people know about my mental health issues and that I have attempted to end my life twice. They will judge me on my mental health and won't give me a job. I feel like I have no future at all."

Those who came to the hotels after detention were often more depressed and required special counselling sessions for their mental health and well-being.

#### **CULTURAL VARIATIONS IN COPING MECHANISMS**

For me, being mentally well means being able to talk to my family back home and knowing they are safe."

A significant insight from the focus groups was the variation in how participants defined mental health and the coping mechanisms they used to manage stress. Each participant's understanding of mental health was shaped by their cultural background, personal experiences, and the unique challenges they faced in the asylum process.

Many individuals struggled to distinguish between mental health and mental illness, and some were reluctant to share their mental health issues for fear that it might negatively impact their asylum application.

Some participants viewed mental health through a clinical lens, focusing on psychological conditions such as anxiety or depression. In contrast, others described mental health more holistically, encompassing social connections, spiritual practices, and community engagement.

Making new friends is always challenging for me, and moving to a new place fills me with fear

Coping strategies also varied widely among participants. While some engaged in physical activities or sought community support to relieve stress, others preferred solitary practices such as prayer and meditation. These differences highlight the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to mental health services, as asylum seekers may have diverse needs and preferences for support.

Participants expressed feelings of struggle in coping with stress and anxiety. Many also found it challenging to live with individuals from different educational backgrounds, religions, and languages. A lack of cultural commonality made making new friends difficult for some.

"I am struggling to cope with my stress and anxiety. The medications I've tried aren't helping, and I'm concerned about becoming addicted to them. I feel lost and don't know where to turn for guidance about my future and the next steps I should take."

Perceived cultural expectations also played a role in participants seeking support. Some male participants saw their traditional role as having an expectation to appear strong in the face of challenges and to be discouraged from crying or expressing vulnerability.

#### **FACTORS INFLUENCING MENTAL HEALTH**

I used to have a career back home, and now I feel useless just waiting for something to happen

During the focus group discussions, it became evident that the educational level, age, and gender of participants significantly influenced how they coped with stress and mental health challenges. Participants with higher levels of education reported experiencing more intense stress and anxiety, particularly related to their inability to work and the prolonged waiting periods for asylum decisions. They expressed frustration over being jobless and feeling unproductive, which exacerbated their mental health struggles.

Younger participants appeared more relaxed and engaged in exploring their surroundings. They participated in various community activities and were generally more optimistic about their future. However, participants aged 30 to 45 expressed higher levels of anxiety and concern about their status and the uncertainty surrounding their asylum applications.

I am a PhD student, and it is quite depressing for me to sit in the hotel and do nothing.

Gender differences were also observed in how participants managed their mental health. Female participants were more open to discussing their emotional challenges and seeking medical support to cope with stress. In contrast, male participants were more reluctant to admit their mental health struggles, often due to perceived societal and familial expectations to remain strong.

Single men reported higher levels of mental health issues compared to their female counterparts. Additionally, language barriers and dissatisfaction with the provided food were recurring concerns among participants.

Differences by Education Level: It was found that individuals with higher education levels experienced very high stress due to uncertainty about their future status. In contrast, those with lower educational levels or who were illiterate had a clearer understanding of available job opportunities and were more open to taking any job rather than being fixed in a specific field.

**Differences by Age Group**: Young people were generally more relaxed and experienced less stress and pressure. Those aged 25 to 45 were at higher risk for mental health issues and more prone to suicidal thoughts due to the asylum process and uncertainty about their status and employment.

Gender-Based Trends: During the focus groups, it was noted that women were more willing to discuss their issues compared to men. Women sought more medical support from general practitioners regarding their mental health issues than men did. Many men, especially those from Asian and African countries, felt unable to express their mental health struggles due to perceived cultural beliefs that equated vulnerability with weakness. They felt higher societal pressure, compelling them to support their families, regardless of their legal status in the UK.

Extended families often placed additional pressure on them to secure employment and provide support. As a result, men tended to experience more mental health issues while remaining reluctant to discuss their challenges with others.

In one instance, a 45-year-old man with four children suffered a heart attack after his family's asylum application was denied. He was highly educated but hesitant to share his worries, whereas his wife was more accustomed to discussing her concerns and had been referred to various support services based on her needs.

## **KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

- EXPAND CULTURALLY SENSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES, INCLUDING MULTILINGUAL THERAPY AND PEER SUPPORT GROUPS.
- PROVIDE TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE,
   PARTICULARLY FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH PAST EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE OR PERSECUTION.
- INCREASE AWARENESS AND ACCESSIBILITY OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES, ENSURING ASYLUM SEEKERS UNDERSTAND THEIR RIGHTS AND AVAILABLE SUPPORT.

#### LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

- SIMPLIFY AND IMPROVE COMMUNICATION ON THE ASYLUM PROCESS, ENSURING ALL APPLICANTS RECEIVE INFORMATION IN THEIR NATIVE LANGUAGE.
- ESTABLISH DEDICATED CASEWORKERS TO HELP ASYLUM SEEKERS NAVIGATE APPOINTMENTS, LEGAL PROCESSES, AND ESSENTIAL SERVICES.

## **KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### LIVING CONDITIONS AND NUTRITION

- IMPROVE ACCOMMODATION STANDARDS, PARTICULARLY FOR FAMILIES AND PREGNANT WOMEN, BY OFFERING MORE PRIVACY AND FLEXIBILITY IN MEAL PROVISIONS.
- ALLOW ASYLUM SEEKERS GREATER
   AUTONOMY IN FOOD CHOICES BY PROVIDING
   COOKING FACILITIES OR FINANCIAL
   ASSISTANCE FOR GROCERIES.

#### **EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES**

- LIFT WORK RESTRICTIONS OR PROVIDE STRUCTURED VOLUNTEERING AND TRAINING PROGRAMS TO HELP ASYLUM SEEKERS MAINTAIN SKILLS AND PREPARE FOR FUTURE EMPLOYMENT.
- OFFER ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSES TAILORED TO DIFFERENT EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUNDS AND LITERACY LEVELS.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

#### SAFETY AND COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

- STRENGTHEN ANTI-RACISM AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE INCLUSIVITY AND PROTECT ASYLUM SEEKERS FROM DISCRIMINATION.
- IMPROVE SECURITY MEASURES IN ACCOMMODATIONS WHILE FOSTERING A MORE WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT WITHIN LOCAL COMMUNITIES.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

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