



**NATIONAL
CONVERSATION**

ABERDEEN REPORT

MARCH 2017

CONTEXT

Aberdeen is a Scottish city of 230,000 people, surrounded by a prosperous rural hinterland. As a consequence of the oil industry, average wages are higher than the rest of Scotland, although the unemployment rate is similar. There are stark income inequalities in the city.

Aberdeen has long-established Bangladeshi and Chinese communities. An estimated 17.5% of the city's population is born overseas, with the largest group of new arrivals coming from Poland. This makes Aberdeen the local authority with the highest proportion of overseas born people in Scotland, higher than Edinburgh (15.8%) and Glasgow (14.1%). Rents are very high in the city, and there is a shortage of housing. As a consequence, many Eastern European migrants have settled where housing is affordable, most usually deprived neighbourhoods such as Tillydrone and Torry.

The construction, transport, fish processing and hospitality sectors are major employers of migrant workers from the EU. There are significant numbers of EU staff in the two universities in the city. Migrant workers also live in the countryside surrounding Aberdeen, many of them employed in Scotland's soft fruit industry. This group rarely come into Aberdeen and have a low profile.

There are two universities in the city, educating nearly 7,000 international students between them. Neither Aberdeen nor Aberdeenshire provide accommodation for asylum-seekers, but these two local authorities have been very generous to Syrian refugees resettled in the UK from camps in the Middle East, between them offering to take 150 families and individuals. Many of Syrian refugees have multiple vulnerabilities and are likely to find getting work very difficult.

WHAT WE DID

A stakeholder meeting was held with 10 representatives from Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire councils, the Job Centre, university, charity and community organisations. They were asked questions about attitudes to migration in the local area, and the future policy approaches they wanted to see in relation to EU migration and non-EU migration. Questions also probed the changes that would be needed to achieve a consensus on immigration. The stakeholder group was also asked about the impact of migration in the local area and about integration issues that had arisen. Again, the stakeholder group was asked about policy changes that would better address issues that had arisen in the area.

Later, a citizens' panel was held with eight members of the public recruited to represent a range of views on immigration, with the very sceptical and very pro-migration filtered out through a pre-interview screening question. All had come from the city of Aberdeen. Further demographic information about the group is given at the end of this report. Basing our conversation on a discussion guide, the panels were asked questions about their views on the impact of immigration on the UK and their local area, EU and non-EU migration flows and on their opinions about integration. The citizens' panel also looked at securing a consensus, with participants asked about what needs to change in order to gain their trust and broad support for how the Government handles immigration and integration. The citizens' panel also looked at securing a consensus, with participants asked about what needs to change in order to gain their trust and broad support for how the Government handles immigration and integration.

KEY FINDINGS

Attitudes towards immigration

The citizens' panel were asked '*on a scale of 1-10 do you feel that immigration has had a positive or negative impact on the UK, nationally and in your local community*'. Their average score was 6.3 with a range from 5 to 8.5. The panel included three students, two of whom felt that migration had been largely positive, with few negative impacts. The remaining panel members balanced the benefits of migration, with concerns about pressures on school places and housing. Overall, there was a consensus that Scottish people were more welcoming to new migrants than those living "*down south*" and took pride in this attitude.

In previous citizens' panels run in Bradford, March (Cambridgeshire) and North Tyneside, those who attended voiced concerns that a minority of migrants had come to the UK so as to take advantage of generous welfare benefits. This issue was not raised by the Aberdeen panel. However, some members of the panel (including those from minority ethnic groups) had major concerns that weak border controls exposed communities to crime and terrorism. This view was much more forcefully articulated than in the previous panels. It is uncertain why this is so, given that there are no big national differences in the fear of crime between Scotland and England. One possible explanation is that many panel members lived in the more deprived and high-crime areas of the city.

Those who attended the stakeholder meeting confirmed that had been some hostility to EU migrants in the more deprived parts of Aberdeen, although they, too, felt that overall Aberdeen (and Scotland) felt more tolerant and welcoming to new migrants than parts of England. The stakeholder panel felt that migration was discussed in a more positive manner, both among those who held political office and in everyday conversation.

EU migration

The citizens' panel discussed the impact of EU migration on Aberdeen, as well as the integration of EU migrants (see below). There was no consensus about future approaches to EU migration after the UK leaves the EU. Three panel members wanted freedom of movement in its current form to be retained, with the remainder divided between a cap on low-skilled migrants from the EU or treating EU labour migrants in the same way as those from outside the EU. The discussion soon moved on to debate whether the Scottish Government should have control over migration policy and its borders. The panel was divided on this, with about half of them supporting the devolution of

immigration and half of them not. The main reason that devolution was not supported came down to border control, rather than unionist sentiments: the Scottish Government was not sufficiently trusted to manage its borders and immigration. There was a strongly held view that lax border control would allow criminals and terrorists into the UK.

“I feel very strongly that the Scottish Government should set immigration figures in this country.”

“We need a database in Scotland to check that refugees and migrants aren’t criminals.”

“Yes, part me thinks that Scotland should be in charge of immigration, but we have no border control and the idea is just not practical” (Citizens’ panel participants).

The discussion then moved on to issues of transparency and trust, a theme that was repeated at later intervals in the citizens’ panel. Greater transparency was a key demand of panel members in Aberdeen, as well as our preceding panels in Bradford, March and North Tyneside.

“We need to know about the good points, the bad things and the grey areas...Ask a question and the prime minister should answer it straight” (Citizens’ panel participants).

Members of the citizens’ panel felt they were being duped or lied to by the Government, and politicians more broadly. This may relate to a general lack of trust in those who hold political power, as well the coverage of immigration in social and print media. And there are no easy answers to this problem. But there is no guarantee that accessible and independent sources of information on immigration would be trusted by the public. This is an issue the National Conversation on Immigration will probe in greater depth in future panels.

Non-EU migration

The discussion in the citizens’ panel mostly focussed on student migration. Some panel members held the view that there were too many students in the city, although they were keen to point out that they had no specific negative views about international students. In a city where rents were high and there were shortages of accommodation, students were felt to add to the housing problems experienced in Aberdeen. Parts of the city were described as *“ghost towns”* in the summer.

There was also a further discussion about border control in the citizens’ panel and a lack of confidence in the Government to deliver its stated policy aims, in relation to reducing net migration and removing groups such as foreign criminals. Many panel members did not trust the Government to administer border

control competently.

“There is all this talk, talk, talk about immigration, then nothing gets done. We just lose confidence and go round in circles....the system is wholly inadequate” (Citizens’ panel participant).

About half the group would be willing to pay more through taxation for more effective border control and a reduction in the numbers of undocumented migrants.

The conveners of the panel were asked if they knew how many undocumented migrants were living in the UK and gave an answer that it was impossible to cite a precise figure due to the clandestine nature of undocumented migration, although research has suggested a range of 100,000 to about 800,000 undocumented migrants in the UK¹. Panel members expressed surprise at the high numbers, although recognised that there were few undocumented migrants in Aberdeen. The majority of panel members felt the Government should take firmer action to deal with undocumented migration, although to treat the affected migrants on a case-by-case basis. No-one favoured a blanket amnesty.

Asylum-seekers and refugees

Unanimously, the citizens’ panel were sympathetic to the plight of asylum-seekers and refugees and understood that those who had been granted refugee status had fled war or persecution. A majority of the panel were happy for the numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees to be increased. This contrasts with the views that were expressed in the citizens’ panels in Bradford and North Tyneside.

As already noted, neither Aberdeen nor Aberdeenshire provide accommodation for dispersed asylum-seekers. However, the two councils have offered to take 150 Syrian refugees through the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Programme. The stakeholder meeting confirmed that those who lived in Aberdeen had generally been welcoming to resettled Syrian refugees, with local faith leaders willing to articulate this support publicly.

Numbers

Unanimously the citizens’ panel were happy for the numbers of highly-skilled EU migrants to be increased and the numbers of low-skilled EU migrants to remain the same. There were also majorities in favour of increasing the number of highly-skilled migrants from outside the EU and the numbers of asylum-seekers. A majority of panel members felt that the number of non-EU family migrants should remain about the same, but the group was much more divided on the numbers of international students, perhaps reflecting the discussion

described above.

Impact of migration

While everyone who attended the citizens' panel voiced benefits of immigration, these were often balanced by concerns about negative impacts in some parts of Aberdeen. The older panel members felt that high levels of migration into parts of the city had put pressure on school places and pushed up rents. Given housing shortages and the high cost of accommodation in Aberdeen this is understandable. As noted above, many new migrants are living in the granite tenements of Tillydrone and Torry. Here, poverty, poor housing and pressures on public services have made integration more difficult to achieve and can contribute to resentment.

"We don't have the infrastructure and schools are my main concern, and I worry about my daughter's school and [secondary] school places, although migration brings a lot to the nation" (Citizens' panel participant).

Integration

Almost everyone who attended the citizens' panel had friends who were migrants, either from the EU or outside it. They had mostly met them through their work. There was a consensus that migrants, the host community, councils and the Government all had a role to play in making integration happen. The panel suggested ways to assist the integration of new arrivals, through better advice from the council and making an effort to speak to new neighbours.

However, panel members who were parents felt there were challenges in integrating large numbers of non-English speaking children in Aberdeen's schools. They were of the opinion that their own children's education might suffer if there were large numbers of children who could not speak English in certain schools, as teachers' attention would be diverted to helping the new arrivals. Panel members gave examples of such schools where this was happening in Aberdeen.

Mechanisms for funding English as an additional language (EAL) teaching in schools have been historically different in Scotland, compared with England. Money for English language teaching is allocated annually to a local authority through the Additional Support Needs budget. The local authority then has the freedom to decide how this money is spent. Theoretically, this mechanism is reasonably responsive to population change. Parental perceptions that large numbers of non-English speaking children impacts negatively on the education of the 'locals' may be down to a number of causes. First, it may be due to policy failures: to provide sufficient funding or to allocate it to the right schools. Second, such a perception may also be due to failures of

communication, for example, not providing a space for parents to air their concerns and to inform them about how newly-arrived pupils are helped to learn English at school. Thus addressing the former by providing more money may not necessarily deal with resentment caused by competition for public goods. In neighbourhoods experiencing high levels of migration, local authorities, schools and hospitals might wish to consider their own 'conversations' with local communities how to address pressures on public services caused by migration.

In the stakeholder meeting, the discussion mostly focussed on the economic aspects of integration, in particular, employment and English language fluency. It was felt that some EU migrants had become trapped in low-paid work below their skills level, with little opportunity of progression. While Scotland has an ESOL² strategy³, there was an agreement that there was not enough appropriate English language classes run in the local colleges, particularly for those working long hours. The fees charged by local colleges were also beyond the means of many EU migrants. Many Syrian refugees have multiple vulnerabilities and are likely to find getting work very difficult.

Efforts have been made to address these issues through innovative projects. Grampian Regional Equality Council runs drop-in 'language cafes' in Aberdeen, offering informal English language help and a chance to practice speaking with others through semi-structured activities. The language cafes also enable advice to be disseminated and are an opportunity for new arrivals to meet others in a friendly, relaxed environment.

Points for consensus

There were a number of points of agreement about the future direction of immigration policy among the citizens' panel, with many of these views supported in the stakeholder meeting.

Delivering on effective border control and immigration enforcement:

Stopping clandestine entry and removing visa overstayers will help restore trust in the Government to manage migration.

Find effective ways of dealing with the impact of rapid immigration on schools:

Funding mechanisms need to be responsive enough to provide extra school places where they are needed, as well as English language support.

Address housing shortages:

Increasing the supply of decent and affordable housing would help address resentment to migrants in deprived areas.

Openness and transparency:

The citizens' panel wanted politicians to be more open and truthful about immigration policy.

CONCLUSIONS

This was our first visit to Scotland and it was interesting to consider differences in the way that immigration was discussed in Aberdeen compared with our English visits. Both the citizens' panel and the stakeholder meeting discussed whether the Scottish Government should be given greater control over immigration policy and both groups were divided on this issue. Trust in the Scottish government to manage immigration a 'Scottish visa' was an argument used by panel members against devolving immigration powers to the Scottish Government.

Panel members felt that Scotland was more welcoming to migrants and refugees than neighbourhoods in England. However, panel members voiced many of the same concerns as did panels in England, with concerns that recent immigration from the EU had led to pressures on housing and school places. Migration was also associated with increased crime, an issue that featured more strongly in the discussion in Aberdeen than in previous panels in England.

While there was an understanding of the plight of refugees and support for refugee protection, concerns about security were raised at points in the discussion and linked to the movement of refugees across Europe. Support for refugee protection was contingent on national and international events.

Demographics of citizens' panel

Gender	Age	Occupation	Ethnic Group
Female	42 years	Administrative Assistant – C1	White Scottish
Female	23 years	Student – C1	White English
Female	44 years	Administrative Assistant – C1	White Scottish
Female	39 years	Support Worker – C2	White Scottish
Male	19 years	Student – C1	Asian Pakistani Scottish
Male	42 years	Foreman – C2	White Scottish
Male	37 years	Labourer - D	White Scottish
Male	22 years	Student – C1	Pakistani Scottish

Organisations represented at the stakeholder meeting

Aberdeen City Council

Aberdeenshire Council

Aberdeen University

Grampian Regional Equality Council

Job Centre Plus

Minority Housing Project

Romanian Chaplaincy

Shelter

Endnotes

- 1 Vollmer, B. (2011) *Irregular Migration in the UK: Definitions, Pathways and Scale*, Oxford: Migration Observatory University of Oxford
- 2 *English for Speakers of Other Languages*
- 3 Education Scotland (2015) *Welcoming Our Learners: Scotland's ESOL Strategy 2015 – 2020*, Edinburgh: Education Scotland.

About

The National Conversation on Immigration is a project run by British future and HOPE not hate.

British Future

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank seeking to involve people in an open conversation which addresses people's hopes and fears about identity and integration, migration and opportunity, so that we feel confident about Britain's Future.



We want to ensure that we engage those who are anxious about cultural identity and economic opportunity in Britain today, as well as those who already feel confident about our society, so that we can together identify workable solutions to make Britain the country we want to live in.

HOPE not hate

HOPE not hate exists to provide a positive antidote to the politics of hate. We combine first class research with community organising and grassroots actions to defeat hate groups and to build community resilience against extremism.



Hate is often the consequence of a loss of hope and an articulation of despair, but given an alternative, especially one that understands and addresses their anger, most people will choose HOPE over hate. Our job is to expose and undermine groups that preach hate, intolerance and division whilst uniting communities around what they have in common.

We aim to take a part in building a society that celebrates rather than scapegoats our differences.