



**NATIONAL
CONVERSATION**

BALLYMENA REPORT

JUNE 2017

CONTEXT

Ballymena is a town of nearly 30,000 people just over 25 miles north west of Belfast. Ballymena falls within Mid and East Antrim Council area.

Similar to other once prosperous parts of Northern Ireland, Ballymena has experienced economic decline over the last 50 years. In parts this was a consequence of declining economic investment during the Troubles. Additionally, a number of large manufacturing employers have closed their factories in Ballymena, moving production overseas. Despite recent investment, factory closures continue: in 2016, the cigarette manufacturer JTI Gallaher closed its Ballymena factory with the loss of 850 jobs and next year – 2018 Michelin will end tyre production in the town, with the loss of 900 jobs. Today, the IT and public sector provide many jobs in Ballymena, although Wrightbus, one of Northern Ireland's largest manufacturing industries, is still producing buses in the town, including London's new Routemaster.

Ballymena gives the appearance of a divided town, where religious and political segregation are made more stark by economic divisions. The town centre's shops include those selling artisan foodstuffs and expensive clothes in close proximity to discount stores and pawn shops.

Census 2011 indicated that 20% of Ballymena's population identified themselves as Roman Catholic and 63% identified as Protestant. While more prosperous areas are mixed in terms of religion and political tradition, the less affluent parts of Ballymena tend to be segregated. The Troubles and the loss of key industries meant that there was very little international immigration to Ballymena until relatively recently. The most recent population estimates suggest that 3.5% of the population of the Mid and East Antrim Council area were born outside the UK, below the average for Northern Ireland and well below the rest of the UK. A wide range of statistics suggest that those from Poland are the largest migrant group in the area, but Romanians are another visible migrant group in Ballymena.

WHAT WE DID

A citizens' panel was held with ten members of the public recruited to represent a range of views on immigration, with the very hostile and very pro-migration filtered out through a pre-interview screening question. All panel members came from Ballymena and its immediate environs. As with other panels in Northern Ireland, participants reflected the range of Northern Ireland's political traditions and faith communities. Further demographic information about the group is given at the end of this report, but this panel contained a higher proportion of participants of social grades A and B than our panels in Dungannon and Derry-Londonderry, also comprising a high proportion of people who ran or formerly ran small businesses.

Basing our conversation on a discussion guide, the panel 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 was also questioned about differences in attitudes to immigration between Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK.

KEY FINDINGS

Attitudes to 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 6.9 with a range from 5 to 8. All of the panel were balancers, citing the benefits of migration alongside their concerns, which primarily focussed on the link they saw between immigration and terrorism.

"I just think there are positive and negative aspects [of immigration] in my mind. When I was working with people of different nationalities and they certainly have, and I was in the health service, and they certainly have a lot to contribute, but then there are obviously down sides to immigration, a lot of them perceive them as coming and using, costing us money, which I don't think is necessarily the case, and I'm sitting right in the middle on this" (Citizens' panel participant).

Overall, the Ballymena panel felt that the benefits of migration outweighed any negative impacts. To date, the Ballymena panel has the highest positive score for the national and local impacts of migration and everyone in the group made positive statements about the impact of immigration in the local area and nationally, across Ireland and the UK. This may reflect the higher level of education of this panel and their greater levels of financial security, with migrants not seen as a threat to their economic well-being. Significantly, the pressures that migration can place on public services and housing were barely mentioned, even after prompting. Panel members also drew on their own largely positive experiences of migration and that of family and friends, and these views also impacted on how they judged the impacts of migration.

"I'm an immigrant, and I came over here over 50 years ago for a job. I'm pretty positive about it, but I think there are two important things, firstly the attitude of the people receiving immigrants and then the immigrants themselves, what kind of contribution are they prepared to make" (Citizens' panel participant).

Most panel members relied on television as the main source of reliable information about migration and were critical about the balance of newspaper reporting: *"they focus on what goes wrong and not on what goes right."*

The panel discussed differences between attitudes to immigration in Northern Ireland, compared with England, Scotland and Wales. As with the other panels in Northern Ireland, the panel felt that immigration was a lower profile issue in Northern Ireland, as the numbers of migrants and refugees was lower. It was felt that Northern Ireland was not an attractive destination for migrants during the Troubles.

Participants saw the higher levels of migration since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 as a vote of confidence in Northern Ireland's economy.

EU migration

There was a discussion about the changes that panellists wanted made to EU migration policy after Brexit. Demands focussed on greater security vetting of potential migrants alongside an "Australian style point-based system" where potential migrants had to have skills that matched with labour market shortages.

"I'd have to say straight of I don't know what limits are already in place, there's the safety aspect, as were very aware of now, what's been going on over the last couple of weeks, and there's going to have to be more monitoring of people coming in from other countries and the checks will have to be done much more thoroughly."

"I think there are some countries which seem to have a much better policy towards immigration, like the Australian system on points based on points and what the country needs, instead of taking the next 200,000 people who just want a better life"
(Citizens' panel participants).

There was an expectation that the numbers of EU migrants would level off when the UK left the EU. The citizens' panel then voted in favour of their preferred option for rules covering EU migration after the UK leaves the EU, with the majority wanting an annual cap on EU migrants coming to take up low-skilled jobs.

The panel also discussed how immigration across the UK-Ireland land border might be managed when the UK left the EU. The group included those who had voted Leave and Remain in the EU referendum – in the Westminster constituency in which Ballymena is located, 62.2% of referendum vote was for Leave. As with the other citizens' panels in Northern Ireland, there was some anxiety about the impact of Brexit on Northern Ireland, with some concerns about the impact on the peace process and the economy, although these anxieties seemed to be less acutely felt than in Derry-Londonderry and Dungannon.

Although the main political parties in Northern Ireland have stated that they want to keep the Common Travel Area and the open border between the UK and Ireland, panel participants did not seem aware of this commitment and expected that there would again have to be checks at this border. The citizens' panel took place five days after the London Bridge attacks of 3 June 2017 and it had recently been made public that one of the terrorists was a Moroccan who had spent a period of time living in the Dublin area. There was a debate about whether increased security concerns would justify a hard border between Ireland and the UK.

“A lot of people have voted to come out, over time I think people have changed their mind, I didn’t want to come out, it’s going to be an inconvenience for us, the costs to put the barrier back again.”

“Lorries are going backward a and forwards all the time, lots of good from here are shipped from Dublin, now we have an extra safety issue, it’s not the IRA they’re worried about anymore, its people coming in from other parts of Europe, Syria, I don’t know what they will have to do, but they’ll have to do it gently.”

(Citizens’ panel participants).

Non-EU Migration

The citizens’ panel felt that work, student and family migration from outside the EU was generally well-managed and concerns about such immigration flows were not felt in Northern Ireland. We discussed some of the regulations covering work, student and family migration. Most people were unaware that such restrictions were in place. Several panel members felt that the minimum income threshold for family migration disadvantaged those living in Northern Ireland because wages were lower than in many other parts of the UK. Almost everyone on the panel was happy for the numbers of international students to be increased, with no-one wanting reductions in student numbers. International students were viewed as temporary migrants who made an economic and cultural contribution to the UK.

Asylum seekers and refugees

There was some underlying sympathy for refugees, with most of the panel agreeing that “we *should* do as much as we can.” This support was stronger than in most other places that the National Conversation on Immigration has visited to date and is reflected in the views of panel members about the numbers of refugees that the UK should admit. Three panel members were happy for the the number of asylum-seekers to be increased, and no panel member wanted to see reductions in the numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees coming to the UK. These views contrast with opinions voiced in all other panels that we have run so far, and may reflect a more middle class and religiously observant panel than elsewhere. At least half the panel were church-goers and many attended churches that had appeals for Syrian and other groups of refugees. Participants talked about the activity of their churches in the discussion.

But this underlying sentiment was balanced with security concerns, with migration flows from the Middle East and across the Mediterranean considered a security risk because they might bring in terrorists. All panel members wanted much greater vetting of asylum-seekers.

“I’d have to say straight off I don’t know what limits are already in place, there’s the safety aspect, as were very aware of now,

what's been going on over the last couple of weeks, and there's going to have to be more monitoring of people coming in from other countries, and maybe different levels for people coming in from different countries. I think the biggest thing is going to have to be the safety aspect of people coming in. I think we could redirect some of the foreign aid to the people we are letting in to the country. And we have to look at the experiences where it hasn't worked, and we have to look at Merkel, where she opened the floodgates and crime has drastically increased and attitudes towards women."

"I think it's a very difficult call for people to make. They have to balance numbers against checks will have to be done much more thoroughly (Citizens' panel participants).

Border control

Panel members were questioned about their views on the effectiveness of border controls. As already noted, security issues were a major concern aired by the panel. Almost everyone wanted criminal record checks on EU migrants and improved vetting of migrants who leaving zones of conflict. Unlike other panels where this question has been asked, the Ballymena panel were willing to pay a little tax if it enabled improved security.

Numbers

Panel members voted on whether they wanted numbers for specific groups of migrants to be increased, remain the same or to be reduced. Half of the panel were happy for the numbers of high-skilled workers from within and outside the EU to be increased, with most other people happy that numbers remained about the same. Significantly, everyone on the panel wanted the numbers of seasonal workers to remain the same, an opinion that has not been articulated outside Northern Ireland. This may reflect the greater dependence of Northern Ireland's economy on food and farming, compared to most other places in the UK.

The panel was fairly equally divided on low-skilled and family migration, with about half wanting numbers to be reduced, and the remainder content with numbers remaining about the same. The majority of the panel were happy for the numbers of overseas students to be increased, with no-one wanting reductions in student numbers.

As noted above, no panel member wanted the numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees to be reduced, a finding that contrasts with all other citizens' panels held so far. Five members of the panel were happy for the numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees to remain the same, while three were content for their numbers to be increased, despite their concerns about security described above.

The panel was also asked about their views about the Government's net migration target. Just one person had heard of the net migration target. There were mixed views about the value of such a target when it was explained to the panel. Some people felt that the net keeping the migration target enabled the Government to keep a track on overall numbers. Other panel members had little trust in statistics and numbers, feeling that they were inaccurate, selective or solely used to support a political cause.

"There's an election coming up, and the figures, even in the Brexit vote, we were told lies, one paper says one figure, another newspaper says another, I have no faith, not even in the civil servants who handle the figures. I don't think politicians want to give us the truth, they manipulate them [statistics]"
(Citizens' panel participant).

The impact of migration

As already noted, most panel participants felt that the benefits of migration outweighed negative impacts. Panel members raised few concerns about pressures on public services or housing, even when prompted, although some people felt that providing interpreters incurred extra costs to the state. Lower levels of immigration into Ballymena, compared with elsewhere in the UK and their comparative economic security may have led to lower levels of concern about pressures on public services.

"Certainly when I was working, we did have a lot of ladies, I was a midwife, they weren't able to speak the language, therefore we had to, if there were any queries whatsoever, we would have to pay for a translator to come, we had to provide a translator to every single appointment" (Citizens' panel participant).

Integration

The discussion about integration focussed on two issues: the integration of Muslim communities elsewhere in the UK as well as their perceptions about the integration of migrants who had arrived in Ballymena. One or two panel members were concerned that Muslims (a group with whom panel members did not have meaningful contact with) were not integrating in places such as Birmingham, although this was not a major point of discussion.

The panel felt that people were fairly welcoming and tolerant in Ballymena and that local churches had helped integration by running language classes and events to welcome new arrivals. As in other panels we held in Northern Ireland, panel members felt that religious divides could sometimes hinder integration, as new migrants could be caught between sectarian divides and not be aware of some of the signifiers and emblems of these divisions.

Compared with citizens' panels that we have held in England, the Ballymena, Derry-Londonderry and Dungannon panel had fewer concerns about integration and a greater level of acceptance of social segregation. That many parts of Northern Ireland are segregated by religion and political tradition may have influenced such views, with all three panels expressing a view that it is normal to "want to mix with your own kind". Panel members in Ballymena also talked about their own experiences of migration and of integrating into a new society as a way of explaining that social integration sometimes runs against human nature

"Your point about people coming here - as a young man I went to South Africa for four or five years and it was a great experience and we were like, and we had an Irish group, and we still mixed and had South African friends, but it's human nature that you will stick with your own tribe, let's call it. You can only mix so much" (Citizens' panel participant).

Regaining trust in the immigration system

Participants were asked about the changes they would like to see brought in to enable greater confidence in the immigration system. Improved security and pre-migration vetting featured very high on the list of improvements that panel members wanted made to the immigration system. Eight of the ten panel members wanted such changes made to the immigration system. Panel members also wanted more emphasis put on integration, with all new migrants expected to speak English.

"I want more security in place and checks. But over and above there needs to be a database and joined up thinking across Europe" (Citizens' panel participant).

CONCLUSIONS

The Ballymena panel had largely positive views about immigration, feeling that its benefits – nationally and locally – outweighed negative impacts such as extra costs incurred to the exchequer for services such as translation and interpreting. The panel did not express major concerns about the impact of migration on housing and public services. The background of panel members is likely to have influenced their views, as this was a largely middle class group who enjoyed a level of economic security not experienced by panel members we met in Derry-Londonderry.

There was underlying sympathy for refugees, more so than any other panel to date, although the desire to help refugees was qualified by concerns about security. Indeed, worries about security ran throughout the panel discussion. Improved vetting of migrants dominated the list of policy changes that panel members wanted.

The views that we heard in the three Northern Ireland panels suggest that there are some differences in public perceptions about immigration and integration in Northern Ireland, compared with elsewhere in the UK. Leaving the EU appears to be a much greater source of anxiety in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK, in relation to the impact that Brexit may have on the economy, investment and the peace process. But immigration appears to be lower down the list of public concerns, compared with England, where polling¹ shows that immigration has rarely dropped out of the top five issues facing the UK. We found fewer concerns about social segregation in Northern Ireland compared with elsewhere in the UK.

Lower levels of international migration into Northern Ireland, and the propensity to refer to as well as personal and family experiences of emigration may have caused a slightly greater acceptance of recent immigration in Northern Ireland.

Demographics of the citizens' panel

Gender	Age	Occupation	Religious identity
Female	47 years	Childminder	White British/Irish & Protestant
Female	69 years	Retired midwife	White British/Irish & Protestant
Female	20 years	Student	White British/Irish & Roman Catholic
Female	61 years	Childminder	White British/Irish & Protestant
Female	52 years	Local government officer	White British/Irish & Catholic
Male	91 years	Retired – former owner of cleaning business	White British/Irish & Protestant
Male	72 years	Retired – former company director	White British/Irish & Protestant
Male	32 years	Healthcare worker	White British/Irish & Protestant
Male	58 years	Retired – former bank manager	White British/Irish & Roman Catholic
Male	65 years	Retired – former manager	White British/Irish & Protestant

Endnotes

1 Polling rarely covers Northern Ireland, so there is no quantitative data such as the Ipsos MORI monthly tracker that gives more information on attitudes to immigration in Northern Ireland.

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 uses research, education and public engagement to challenge mistrust and racism, and helps to build communities that are inclusive, celebrate shared identities and are resilient to hate.

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.

