



**NATIONAL
CONVERSATION**

**KIDDERMINSTER
REPORT
NOVEMBER 2017**

CONTEXT

The National Conversation on Immigration visited Kidderminster, a town of 56,000 people located 17 miles from Birmingham and 15 miles from Worcester. There is a two-tiered local government structure in Worcestershire; while education, social care and public health are the responsibility of Worcestershire County Council, Wyre Forest district council oversees housing and leisure services.

Kidderminster grew as a market town and later became a centre of carpet manufacturing. There were over 30 carpet factories in the town in the 1950s. Although this traditional industry has declined, carpet manufacturing and distribution still takes place in Kidderminster. But much of this has declined, and the town's economy is now reliant on small businesses, and home to many commuters who work in nearby conurbations or in out-of-town industrial parks. At £473, average weekly wages are below the regional (£517) and GB average (£553)¹.

Some 94.7% of the population of Wyre Forest were of white British ethnicity at the time of the 2011 Census. By 2016, the overseas-born population of the district was estimated to be just 3%. Despite small numbers there has been a long history of migration in Kidderminster. Irish migrants in the 19th century onwards were joined in the 1950s and 1960s by Poles, Italians and Commonwealth migrants who include a small, but long established Bangladeshi community.

The expansion of the EU brought considerable numbers of migrant workers to Worcestershire, although far more have settled in the Vale of Evesham where many are employed in horticulture and food processing. Rapid population change in this part of Worcestershire has helped make immigration a high profile issue in the whole county.

Asylum-seekers are not dispersed to Worcestershire, although the county council taken in 50 Syrian refugees under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. The county council also supports a number of unaccompanied refugee children.

WHAT WE DID

A stakeholder meeting was held with representatives from civil society 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. Additionally, the stakeholder group was asked about the impact of migration in the local area and about any integration issues that had arisen.

Later, a citizens' panel was held with ten members of the public recruited to represent the demographics of the town, with a range of views on immigration, with the very sceptical and very pro-migration filtered out through a pre-interview screening question. All panel members came from Kidderminster. Further demographic information about the panel is given at the end of this report.

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.

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'. The average score for the panel was 4.5, with a range from 1 to 7. Although this score was below the National Conversation on Immigration average impact score, it did not fully reflect the tone of the discussion. All of the citizens' panel were 'balancers', seeing both positive and negative impacts of immigration, who thoughtfully debated issues.

"I am on the fence because there's a lot of doctors coming in and people training to be nurses and working long hours, and people who immigrate are filling some of those job roles, but at the same time you've got busier hospitals, and busier GPs, and busier dentists." (Citizens' panel participant).

This citizen's panel mostly comprised non-graduates, some of whom voiced ant-elitist opinions. Contribution was a central theme of the discussion. Participants felt that many migrants made an important economic contribution, filled vacancies and brought important skills. At the same time, most participants voiced concerns about the labour market impacts of migration. They felt that migration had depressed wages and undercut working conditions, with participants particularly critical of employment agencies. This panel also felt employers turned to migrant workers rather than invest in up-skilling local residents. All these changes to working conditions had a negative impact on their lives, decreasing job satisfaction and adding to a sense of lost working pride.

"They're working in the factories and then in 5 years they are going home, in that time they are there's not jobs for local people, no apprenticeships. So they take those jobs and then you are left paying someone to do nothing and they've gone and they've got to be replaced again."

"Companies have stopped paying their lower paid workers and use these agencies that couldn't care less who they are, as long as they get somebody into this job, they don't care who they are, or getting job satisfaction for the people for that reason as well." (Citizens' panel participants).

Although the labour market impacts of migration was the most acute concern of the Kidderminster citizens' panel, most participants felt that migrants themselves should not be blamed for what was happening.

"I think people like to blame immigrants for problems that we have, that have always been here. People say send them back and we'll get our people to do it. No they won't, they won't fruit pick or do these jobs, they didn't do it before, before we had

mass immigration. I do agree with what you say, we are a small island and we are at a breaking point, but I don't know what needs to happen" (Citizens' panel participant)

The decline of industry and the changing nature of work were seen as a trigger for worsening racial tension in the local area. Stakeholders mentioned pockets of active hostility across the area, sometimes stoked by some far-right groups. Although the majority of people opposed these groups, hate crime had worsened following the EU referendum and violent hate crimes had increased. The citizens' panel, too were concerned at a perceived increase in racist sentiments and some violent incidents.

"It's good to have more people joining in but at the same time, you have more problems, more money more problems, more people more problems. Especially round here, I see, I feel that there has been more arguments, more protests, more racism, more anger towards people" (Citizens' panel participant).

Some participants felt that migrants were given preferential access to the NHS and to benefits. When told that EU nationals had to have been resident in the UK for at least a year before they were able to claim any welfare benefits, many panel members felt that this was not enough to prevent misuse of the system. The export of child benefit overseas was an issue that had fostered resentment.

For some participants immigration was an issue that they discussed a lot. For others, it was a less salient issue, and not something that frequently came up in conversation unless triggered by *"the horror stories that you see on the news"*.

The panel were critical of representations of immigration in the media (including social media), but agreed that these had fed their understandings of migration.

EU migration

Free movement rules had caused some anxieties among this citizens' panel, who were concerned that this led to abuse of the benefits system. As with all other citizens' panels, most participants knew very little about the regulations that govern freedom of movement. They assumed that any EU national could move to the UK and immediately receive benefits. The Kidderminster participants wanted to see a system which could vet potential migrants for their skills and potential contributions, and carry out background criminal record checks. Some felt that the Australian or Canadian system did this effectively, a system with which many were aware of as they knew people who had applied for Australian or Canadian visas.

"Like Australia, they won't let you in unless you have something to offer, good careers to offer, job prospects and everything else."

Whereas everyone comes to England, willy-nilly through the open door, literally nothing” (Citizens’ panel participant).

Participants then voted on the options for dealing with EU migration after Brexit. The majority of the citizens’ panel wanted a cap on low-skilled migration, but they also wanted a system that met the needs of business and public services.

Participants were then asked if they would be willing to accept fewer restrictions on EU migration if it meant that British business would get a better deal in the Brexit negotiations. The panel did not support such a compromise.

Stakeholders had concerns about what would happen if tight restrictions to numbers of EU migrants able to work in the UK were introduced. There were particular concern about the potential impact on agricultural and manufacturing sectors, particularly horticulture and food processing in the Vale of Evesham. Both the citizens’ panel and the stakeholders felt that a post-Brexit immigration system would not account fully for the needs of rural areas.

“We need a system with considerable flexibility, not a one size fits all that’s thought up in London and meets London’s needs, but doesn’t think about the needs of agriculture and hospitality” (Citizens’ panel participant).

There was little support on the citizens’ panel or among stakeholders for a system which administers short term visas, as both groups felt this would be unfair to migrants who had made a home here, and that time limits would act as a barrier to integration. Some younger citizens’ panel members who had experience with the Australian Working Holiday Visa felt that this would work in the UK, but other panel members were sceptical about the Home Office’s ability to enforce short term immigration rules.

“I feel it is a bit harsh if someone is working here for three years, say they have worked their way up in a company and then it’s like bye, see you later, you’ve done your job” (Citizens’ panel sparticipant).

Non-EU Migration

Migration from outside of the EU was not a salient issue for the citizens’ panel in Kidderminster, who felt that this was far less of a problem than migration from within the EU. The panel had patchy knowledge of policy which regulates migration from outside of the EU, although most were aware of the high fees paid by international students at university. The panel did not consider international students as migrants, and felt that they contributed a lot to the economy and that flows are well controlled, as there is a visa system in place.

Asylum seekers and refugees

As noted above, asylum-seekers are not dispersed to Worcestershire, although the county council supports small numbers of unaccompanied children who been found hiding in road freight.

When asked which words they associated when hearing the word 'refugee', the citizens' panel responded with sympathy for the plight of those fleeing war and persecution. However, there were also a number of fears that many claims for asylum are not genuine, and some participants were anxious about security, and thought that terrorists could enter as a fifth column in a refugee flow.

“At first I thought about the asylum seekers and refugees coming over from places where they could be killed. They can't go home so they are obviously seeking try to seek asylum in our country so they are helpless and they are scared and they are eager. Then I thought about how many do come and how many do need help...but we as civilians don't really know who they are or where they are coming from” (Citizens' panel participant).

Stakeholders also wanted to see a better system for supporting asylum seekers once they had arrived. The citizens' panel also supported giving asylum-seekers the right to work, which they thought would help integration as well as enabling the Government to monitor asylum-seekers.

Border control

Control was a recurring theme throughout the discussion. When asked what was meant by 'good control', most felt that this entailed better pre-entry checks such as criminal vetting and a rigorously enforced visa system that made sure that migrants' skills and qualifications met UK labour market needs.

The citizens' panel was then given the case study of 'H', an undocumented migrant from Nigeria (see appendix). Most felt that whilst 'H' had not paid taxes, he had supported himself and saved the Government money by caring for his mother. Pragmatic economic arguments were used to justify participants' decisions on this case, and the panel supported an immigration system which assessed people such as 'H' on a case-by-case basis.

The discussion then moved on to debate about how much should be spent on immigration enforcement. The citizens' panel was split as to whether they would pay more through taxation so as to increase the Home Office budget. Some felt that this would be beneficial, and would allow savings in the long run, while others thought money would be wasted. Some participants wanted to fund more immigration officers and additional technology by increasing airport tax and visa fees for visitors to the UK.

Numbers

The panel voted on whether they wanted different types of migration to be increased, reduced or remain about the same. Half of the participants wanted to reduce the numbers of low-skilled and seasonal workers as well as asylum-seekers. However, the overwhelming majority of participants were happy for the numbers of highly-skilled migrants, family migrants and international students to be increased or remain at the same level. Throughout the discussion, the rate of immigration in the UK was a less salient issue than it had been in many other locations visited by the National Conversation on Immigration. This may reflect the comparatively low numbers of migrants in the Kidderminster area and the consequence of an absence of rapid cultural change.

The discussion then moved on to the net migration target. Just two people had heard of this headline indicator, with both knowing that it had not been reached. Instead, the panel felt it would be more appropriate to have different targets for different groups of migrants, which could meet an economic audit.

Impact of migration

As noted above, the citizens' panel saw the impact of migration mostly in relation to labour market issues. While participants thought migrants brought skills and undertook jobs that the *"British don't want to do"*, they also had concerns about the impact of migration on jobs and wages. Participants saw migration as one aspect of globalisation, a process that they felt had left them behind. The town has lost much of its traditional carpet industry and we were told *"the good times have gone in Kidderminster"*.

There was also some concern about the impact of immigration on housing and public services, although unlike on many other citizens' panels across the country, this was secondary to labour market concerns.

Integration and community relations

The citizens' panel had mixed opinions about integration. They felt that there was a good sense of community in Kidderminster and that people generally got along well with each other. Many participants described their good relations with neighbours and work colleagues who were migrants.

At the same time, they gave examples of migrants who they felt were not integrating. As with many other citizens' panels, the Kidderminster group had concerns about integration elsewhere in the UK, and in this case compared experiences in the town to nearby Birmingham. Participants talked about experiencing "culture shock" when visiting parts of Birmingham, as well as describing what they saw as a lack of integration among Birmingham's Pakistani Muslim community.

“In places that are not too far away like Birmingham and places like that, we are a minority and they are the majority. That is when you start to feel out of place. It’s not everybody, some of them are nice, the shopkeepers are nice, but not those who hang around on the streets” (Citizens’ panel participant).

Stakeholders raised a number of issues relating to integration in Worcestershire. They felt there was a need for better English language provision - particularly for those who worked long hours and other groups who could not easily get to a local college. Stakeholders also felt that employers needed to shoulder greater responsibility to help their employees integrate into the wider community, which included encouraging their workers to learn English.

As discussed above, both the citizens’ panel and the stakeholder we met described pockets of active hostility across the area, sometimes stoked by some far-right groups active in the West Midlands. Furthermore, stakeholders felt that hate crime and prejudice in the local area had led the Bangladeshi community to withdraw in on itself and to experience *“an unravelling of a wonderful integration”*.

One citizens’ panel member felt that children were picking up racist sentiments from their parents and another participant spoke about her own experiences of racism, which also affected her children.

“A lot of segregation comes from school kids who might be bullying kids who don’t come from the same country. And obviously they are growing up with, which they get hardened with, and they start using their own language around British people because they are scared” (Citizens’ panel participant)

Surprisingly, almost all participants on the citizens’ panel had direct contact with far-right material online, although they dismissed its contents. Most voiced anger at hearing these views, and at the way immigration was spoken about on social media.

Regaining trust in the immigration system

Participants were asked about the changes they would like to see brought in to enable them to have greater confidence in the immigration system. As already noted, there had been an in depth discussion about agency work, with some panel members wanting this to be better regulated.

Many people wanted better enforcement and more rigorous checks on would-be migrants. At the same time, some participants wanted a more open debate and requested more information about the immigration system.

“I’m going to say tighter security and control, but I’d also agree that we need more knowledge as a nation. Words get thrown out and we don’t actually know what is going on at the borders, so more knowledge” (Citizens’ panel participant).

CONCLUSIONS

Our visit to Kidderminster had much in common with panels we have held in other areas of the country. Control and contribution were, once again, dominant themes, and the panel balanced what they saw as the gains of immigration with concerns about the labour market impacts in relation to jobs, wages and terms of employment. Labour market concerns were more prominent in our discussion in Kidderminster than other areas of the country, spurred by a resentment of agency recruitment, seen to lower wages and working conditions for low skilled jobs.

The visit to Kidderminster also raised some concerns about far-right activity in the area, and the role discrimination can play in inhibiting integration. Successful integration requires new arrivals to feel safe whilst also dealing with those who stoke divisions and promote prejudice and hatred.

APPENDIX

Stakeholders

Malvern City of Sanctuary

Worcestershire County Council

Worcestershire Interfaith Forum

Wyre Forest District Council

Wyre Forest Refugees Welcome

Demographics of citizens' panels

Gender	Age	Occupation	Ethnicity
Female	57 years old	Unemployed - E	Mixed heritage British/Indian
Female	22 years old	Security guard - D	White British
Female	35 years old	Unemployed - E	White British
Female	27 years old	Plumber - C2	White British
Female	58 years old	Archaeological illustrator - B	White British
Male	60 years old	Gardener - C2	White British
Male	23 years old	Security officer - C2	White British
Male	60 years old	Production assistant - C1	White British
Male	65 years old	Administrator - C1	White British
Female	57 years old	Unemployed - E	Mixed heritage British/Indian
Female	22 years old	Security guard - D	White British

Undocumented migrant case study

H is now 42 years old and was born in Nigeria. He came here aged 17 in 1992 to visit his mother who is now a British citizen after she married her second husband who is also a British citizen. H came to the UK with a six month visitors' visa, then he applied for asylum in 1993 as he wanted to stay in the UK. H's asylum case was rejected (he could not show that he had been persecuted and there was no case for giving him refugee status), but he was not detained and removed from the UK.

H has survived by undertaking cash-in-hand work, painting, gardening and working in car washes. In 1994 he gave £6,000 of his and his mother's savings to pay an immigration solicitor to try and sort out his immigration case with the Home Office. The solicitor took the money and disappeared.

H's step father has now died, and in 2003 his mother had a stroke. Since then H has been his mother's main carer. He has no immediate family in Nigeria – his father is dead and he had no brothers or sisters.

To remove H from the UK, immigration officers will have to locate

H, detain him, arrange documents for him and then get the Nigerian authorities to accept him back.
If he is returned to Nigeria, it is likely that he will be removed on a charter flight.

How should the UK government treat H?

Endnotes

1. Wyre Forest data from Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 2017.

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.