



**NATIONAL
CONVERSATION**

**MARCH
CAMBRIDGESHIRE
REPORT**

FEBRUARY 2017

CONTEXT

March is a small market town of 23,000 people, lying between Ely and Wisbech in the Fens. It is the administrative seat of Fenland district council and within the shire county of Cambridgeshire. The Fens are the UK's agricultural heartland and span five local authorities: Northamptonshire, Rutland, Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, a unitary local authority. The area is now a major producer of cereals and vegetables, which supports a large food packing and processing industry.

The farms and food processing factories of the Fenlands' have always relied on new arrivals, from Irish, Poles, Gypsy and Traveller communities in the 1950s, to workers escaping the depression in the Midlands and the North in the 1980s and 1990s. The intensification of agriculture, food production, the increased consumption of processed food, and 'just-in-time' production has changed the nature of work in the Fens. It has quickly demanded a large and flexible workforce, in a sparsely populated rural area. Much of the work is low-paid, with long hours in hard conditions. This demand for labour has largely been met by EU migrants. Migration into the Fens has been rapid, with the overseas-born population in the Fenland district increasing by 177% between 2001 and 2011.

The most recent ONS statistics suggest that 13.3% of the working-age population of Fenland district has been born outside the UK, although that population is not evenly distributed, with some towns experiencing less migration than others. Proportionally, Wisbech has the largest population of migrants, with over a third thought to be from the EU, mostly from Poland, Lithuania and Romania. Immigration has become a heated issue in the Fens which was one of the parts of the UK where the vote to leave the EU was highest. (Some 71.4% of votes were for Leave in the Fenland district council area).

Fenland has an ageing population, with the highest proportion of people aged 65 and over of any district in Cambridgeshire. It also has significant out-migration of better qualified young adults and the proportion of the population with higher level qualifications in Fenland (28%) is lower than the UK average (37%).

WHAT WE DID

A stakeholder meeting was held with 12 representatives from the district and county council, third sector organisations and business groups. 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 nine 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. Most of the panel came from March, although two members came from neighbouring Wisbech. 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 discussion was largely focussed on EU migration, as the panel had strong opinions about the subject.

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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, and in your local community'. Their average score was 4.7 with a range from 2 to 7. There was a large range of views in this panel, with a three people having very sceptical views about migration, and one person who was willing to challenge some of the more negative views. On a few occasions some individuals in the groups made comments that veered towards overt racism, including negative comments about Muslims, which were not challenged by the wider group.

Negative concerns about migration were balanced – to some extent – by members of the citizens' panel who voiced feelings of respect for migrant workers who were judged to be contributing to the local economy. Most panel members had a story of a colleague or a neighbour who was a valued member of their company or local community. The rapid increase in EU migration in the area was felt to be negative, rather than personal experiences with individual migrants which were seen as more positive.

"Yes we do need the lower skilled workers... however do we need quite so many... higher skills definitely need them... however it is that influx from the lower... that causes issues."

"I'm divided on immigration. They do lots of jobs we don't do, but they also bring problems" (Citizens' panel participants).

This panel had major concerns about the impact of EU migration into the area, particularly on local infrastructure; housing, neighbourhoods, the NHS and school places. There were also social concerns and the visibility of migrant communities was discussed in light of the rapid rate of change, as a root for anxieties about immigration. Language was a big part of this and some participants talked about feeling threatened by groups of migrants talking their in the town centre.

"They don't speak English, and you're walking, and you're like... that can be scary" (Citizens' panel participant).

Some of the group attributed behaviours such as street drinking to migrants. The panel also distinguished between national groups of migrant workers, with (sometimes grudging) acceptance of the longer-established Poles and less of more recent Lithuanian and Romanian arrivals.

Both the stakeholders and the panel felt that community relations were thought to be better in March and Chatteris than in Wisbech. The diversity of Cambridgeshire was stressed by both

groups, whereby areas with high levels of deprivation had experienced rapid migration, and those who felt they were already struggling now faced additional strains on resources. In wealthier areas such as Cambridge, this impact was felt less.

The stakeholder meeting felt that there were pockets of real hostility to EU migration in the Fens. There had been a nine per cent rise in hate crime in the three months after the EU referendum – although less than in some parts of the UK. It was alleged at the stakeholder meeting that a local online discussion forum had attracted much unpleasant and prejudiced commentary about migrants.

EU migration

The citizens' panel had the opportunity to discuss the approach that they wanted the Government to take to EU migration after Brexit. One panel member argued to keep free movement rules as they are: *“any person who earns should be allowed”*. The rest of the panel was equally divided between the two other options they were given, which were an annual cap on low-skilled EU migrants and treating EU migrants who want to work in the same way as those from outside the EU.

There was strong support for time-limited visas for EU migrants from both migration-sceptics and the balancers on the citizens' panel, though panel members voiced the desire for more effective border controls which managed people overstaying visas.

“It should be a visa and then go home” (Citizens' panel participant).

There was a strong consensus in the citizens' panel that EU nationals who were currently living in the UK should be allowed to stay and that that migrants should be welcomed into communities so long as they are working, contributing to the economy and paying tax.

“Everyone who is working, who is putting into the pot, who doesn't have a criminal record they should stay” (Citizens' panel participant).

Some members of the panel felt that although it was beneficial that EU workers filled low skilled jobs which did not appeal to British workers, it had become more difficult for British citizens to find employment which met their expectations, and that British workers were not being offered opportunities to train for highly skilled positions.

The stakeholder meeting also discussed EU migration in some depth, both in terms of future policy on migration from the EU, as well how the Government might better deal with the impact of EU

migration. Business voices in the stakeholder meeting wanted to maintain access to an EU workforce. They were sceptical that temporary or seasonal migration routes would meet their needs, as labour demand stretches across the year in many farming and food processing enterprises. For example, when pre-prepared vegetable businesses are not processing produce from the Fens, they are processing imported vegetables. Sector-based quotas for farming and food were the preferred option.

There was a debate among the stakeholders about the tensions between using agencies to supply extra labour when it was needed, or taking on staff directly but with zero hours contracts. The stakeholder meeting gave examples of unscrupulous agencies who withheld workers' salaries, and felt that direct employment was a better option.

Business, civil society and local government stakeholders wanted an early settlement of the status of EU nationals living in the area, and told stories of unease felt by migrant workers and their families, as well as the wider community, since the referendum.

"The whole community feels this sense of anxiety, the work force, the schools" (Stakeholder).

Numbers

The panel voted on whether they wanted different types of migration to be increased, reduced or remain about the same. A majority wanted high-skilled migration from the EU, migrants coming to do seasonal work, family and student migration to remain about the same. Despite supports for low skilled migrants undertaking work without career prospects and *"doing the jobs we don't want to do"*, the citizens' panel overwhelmingly voted to reduce numbers of low-skilled migrant workers, although almost everyone wanted seasonal migrants working on farms and in food factories and hotels to be kept at the same level.

Where members of the public see migrant workers filling named jobs that they perceive need doing, there is much less support for reducing numbers. This factor may explain why the citizens' panel did not want to reduce seasonal workers in farming, food processing and hospitality. The majority of the panel wanted the numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees to be reduced, although most participants were unclear about the definition and entitlements of asylum-seekers.

Impact of migration

In the citizens' panel much of the debate about EU migration focused on views about the impact of migration in the area, with clear concerns about how EU migration had affected housing, the NHS and the availability of school places. The 'NHS paradox' was raised by a number of participants in the citizens' panel, whereby it was understood that the NHS benefited from

overseas staff, while rapid large-scale migration could put a strain on local services.

“They are helping the NHS, but also hindering the NHS”
(Citizens’ panel participant).

Poorly regulated private rental accommodation is a major issue of tension in the area, with some landlords exploiting migrant workers and that this had increased the overall cost of rent.

“They wouldn’t charge someone who they went to school with what they charge someone who has just got into the country and doesn’t know what to do” (Citizens’ panel participant).

While the citizens’ panel were angry about rogue landlords and over-crowded properties, the panel also acknowledged that there were good landlords.

The stakeholder meeting also echoed these concerns. Of the 11,500 dwellings in Wisbech, 1,100 are homes of multiple occupancy (HMOs) - essentially private-rental accommodation for migrant workers, much of it of poor quality and over-crowded. That these homes tended to be in poorer areas, already with weaker infrastructure so the impact is heightened.

“You’ve got one house or a flat, but with ten times the rubbish outside and six times the number of cars” (Local authority representative).

But with many migrants wanting to save money, and much work poorly-paid, the supply of affordable, decent housing has not met demand and landlords have been able to take advantage of this. There was a consensus that the economy had benefited from migrant workers, but the infrastructure had not kept up with population growth in the area.

Many businesses had benefitted greatly from migration without having to consider where to house their staff or take responsibility for the impact migration has on public services. Concerns were raised about the lack of communication between the Government, local businesses and local authorities who often have to shoulder the impact.

“Companies and local councils need to be far, far more in tune with each other so they can build the infrastructure around the numbers... I can’t recall at any time anything passing my desk from local authorities willing to assist integration” (Business stakeholder).

The stakeholder meeting felt that local authority and school funding had not kept up with the numbers of new arrivals, so it was understandable that there were public concerns about the pressures of immigration on public services, particularly on school places and the NHS. The new Controlling Migration Fund

will provide £25 million every year across England to address the impact of migration. Fenland District Council had been involved in developing this fund, but it is not clear how the funding will deal with public concerns, nor whether this is enough to address the pressures on already underfunded public services.

Integration

As discussed above, the rapid pace of population change and the impact of migration on the housing sector and public services has affected community relations in the area. As noted, both the citizens' panel and the stakeholder meeting suggested that there are real tensions, particularly in Wisbech. Both meetings also mentioned conflict between different nationalities of migrant workers - between Poles and Russians, for example – and felt that there also needed to be 'integration' between different migrant communities.

Members of the citizens' panel praised migrant families who were making the effort to 'join in' and encourage their families to be part of the wider community. They gave examples of friendships they had struck with neighbours and work colleagues, or as fellow parents in their children's schools. At the same time, most migrant workers from the EU were felt to lead largely separate lives to panel members. There was an acceptance that some of this 'self-segregation' was natural.

"Lithuanians have friends who are Lithuanians, by human nature you are drawn to your own" (Citizen's panel participant).

The citizens' panel had mixed views about integration in local schools. Some members who were parents felt that schools had done a good job of encouraging children to mix and learn about each other's cultures. However, others argued that children were not mixing well outside of school: *"You invite them to a birthday party and they don't come."*

Views about integration in schools were mirrored when talking about workplace integration. Many in the citizens' panel considered themselves to have friends and colleagues who were EU nationals, but there was also a view that EU nationals led 'parallel lives'. Others believed integration was more of a two way street, and that local communities need to do more to help new migrants feel welcome.

English language fluency came up repeatedly in both the citizens' panel as well as in the stakeholder meeting. Those who attended the stakeholder meeting saw lack of appropriate ESOL provision as a barrier to integration, particularly classes for those who worked long and unsociable hours. Funding streams for workplace 'language cafes' offering drop-in and more flexible support had been discontinued, although this was seen as a good way of employers assisting integration.

Again, stakeholders raised that employment practices could damage integration and raised questions about what their responsibilities should be. Some employers used language criteria to determine shift rotas, for example, those speaking Polish being assigned to particular shifts. This practice meant that migrants did not have an opportunity to mix and practice their English.

The citizen's panel saw language as an integral part of belonging and many considered people speaking other languages to pose a threat. Conversations about safety fed into this, with many participants stating that they felt unsafe when surrounded by people speaking languages they could not understand. Panel members suggested that speaking English should in future be a criteria for getting a visa to come to the UK.

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, which are set out below.

Dealing with the impact of large-scale migration on housing and neighbourhoods:

Poor quality and over-crowded private rental accommodation had caused community tensions and led to exploitation of migrants. This needs to be better regulated and local councils funded to do so. In sparsely populated areas, large employers might need to consider providing housing for staff who are in-migrants, although this poses the risk of further exploitation.

Effective ways of dealing with the impact of rapid immigration on public services:

Funding mechanisms need to be responsive enough to provide extra school places where they are needed, and to prevent adverse impacts of migration on the NHS. In areas experiencing concentrated rapid migration

English language is a key to integration:

Language caused concerns for many on the citizens' panel while stakeholders thought business needed to work better with local authorities in order to provide convenient means for migrants to better their English.

Controls on immigration

Panel members wanted greater enforcement action by immigration officers to make sure that migrants arriving in the UK do not overstay their visas.

Openness and transparency:

The citizens' panel wanted more information about Government policy, who was permitted to enter the UK and in what numbers.

CONCLUSIONS

March is a town in the Fens that has seen rapid EU migration to work in the food and farming sectors. Although migrant workers have helped keep many businesses sustainable, the local infrastructure has not kept up with population change. This panel had strong opinions about the impact of migration on the town, and the pressures that a bigger population had placed on the NHS and the availability of school places. In particular, rapid migration was associated with neighbourhood decline in streets that had large amounts of private rented accommodation.

As noted above, dealing with these local impacts is key to helping those who live in the Fens regain trust in the immigration system. The private rental sector needs better regulation and large employers need to take more responsibility for workers brought into the area.

Organisations represented at the stakeholder meeting

ERMS UK

Cambridgeshire County Council

Fenland District Council

Peterborough City Council

Rosmini Centre

Demographics of the citizens' panel

Gender	Age	Occupation	Ethnic group
Female	38 years	Cable joiner – C2	White British
Female	31 years	Store assistant - D	White British
Female	24 years	Care assistant - D	White British
Female	63 years	Plumber – C2	White British
Female	65 years	HGV driver – C2	White British
Male	30 years	Sales worker – C1	White British
Male	29 years	HGV driver – C2	
Male	58 years	Auctioneer - B	White British
Male	26 years	Fork lift truck driver - D	White British

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.