



**NATIONAL
CONVERSATION**

SHREWSBURY REPORT

JULY 2017

CONTEXT

The National Conversation on Immigration visited Shrewsbury, a town of 72,000 people which is the administrative centre of Shropshire County Council, a unitary local authority. Located close to the A5 and less than ten miles from the Welsh border, Shrewsbury developed as a market town and later as a commercial centre for Shropshire and much of mid-Wales.

Employment in the town reflects this position, with retail, tourism and distribution providing significant numbers of jobs. The food processing and light engineering sectors also provide a number of jobs, as does the NHS and local government. Levels of employment for both men (83.5%) and women (73%) are about four percentage points above the national average¹. Although gross median weekly earnings are below the national average, there are no large spatial and economic divides in Shrewsbury compared with similar towns. As a consequence, new migrants have not clustered in particular areas where there is available rental accommodation, a phenomenon we have seen in many other places across the country.

Despite a healthy economy, good transport links and its proximity to Telford and Birmingham, Shrewsbury's minority ethnic population is very small. The 2011 Census suggests that just 3% of the town's population came from minority ethnic groups, many of whom are employed in the town's hospital. About 7% of the population were born outside the UK, which includes some new migrants from eastern Europe. Shropshire County Council accepted 64 Syrian refugees under the Vulnerable person's Resettlement Scheme, some of whom have been found homes in Shrewsbury. The town opened its first mosque in 2013 and there are a number of civil society organisations working to promote the integration of migrant workers and refugees.

WHAT WE DID

A stakeholder meeting was held with 11 representatives from civil society organisations and a local councillor. This panel had a number of volunteers who were working with Syrian refugees who had come to Shropshire through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. The stakeholder group was 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.

Later, a citizens' panel was held with ten 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 panel members came from Shrewsbury and its immediate environs. 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 6.1 with a range from 2 to 8.

Most of the panel were 'balancers', explaining that immigration had been beneficial to the UK, but was also associated with negative issues. Overwhelmingly, this panel had two concerns. First, the lack of UK government control over EU migration and asylum flows. The panel generally felt that the Government did not have accurate information on immigration or could keep track of who is in the country. Second, and associated with this perceived lack of control, were concerns that criminals had found it easy to enter the UK as migrants. There was a consensus, however, that it was the immigration system, rather than individual law-abiding migrants who were at fault for this lack of control.

"I think there's a difference here between immigrants and immigration. And I think it's the immigration policy that is broken. You know I see, I've put a 7, I have no issue with immigrants, but I do have an issue with the way that it's managed. And I think that for me is a markedly different and we don't really seem to have control over the border" (Citizens' panel participant).

"They haven't got a clue how many immigrants are coming through the gates. They have said, about particular individuals, they shouldn't be allowed out of prisons, let alone another country. Yet here we are all the time and then all of a sudden we suddenly discover whoever from wherever is wanted in god knows in how many countries for these many years. We've let them in, and now we have this big issues now about immigration, it's nothing racist or anything to do with immigrants. It's to do with needing to grasp control for the people who really want to be here" (Citizens' panel participant).

Concerns about criminality and a lack of control over who enters the UK were raised throughout the panel discussion. These sentiments dominated this panel's concerns about immigration. Unlike many of the other panels there were very few comments about pressures on public services. Although common themes across the country, pressures on the NHS and housing were mentioned in passing by two people, but were not elaborated upon by other panel members.

It is difficult to understand why this panel had such strong concerns about migrant criminality. Most panel members worked with migrants and some referred to their own or family experiences of migration. But many of those with such personal experiences still had concerns about control, crime and security.

Some panel members did however suggest that media coverage impacted their attitudes and the recent terrorist attacks are also likely to have had an impact on this panel's views.

"I'm an immigrant, I was born in Ireland. Our country is made up of, and Shrewsbury is made up of lots of different people and it brings lots of positive things. We hear lots of negative things but we don't hear those positive things because they're not worth putting in the press (Citizens' panel participant).

There was a discussion about generational differences in attitudes to immigration and the group felt that prejudiced comments were no longer socially acceptable. We also discussed the characteristics of a non-racist and decent conversation about immigration, as opposed to one that was prejudiced. The group felt that it was sometimes difficult to talk about immigration, but a decent conversation was possible if you did not use labels and stereotype groups.

Some of the citizens' panels views differed considerably from the stakeholders' interpretation of local attitudes to immigration. In our meeting with the stakeholders we asked them about their perceptions of public opinion. We were told that Shrewsbury's population generally have positive attitudes to immigration and have been supportive of accepting Syrian refugees. But as with many places the National Conversation has visited, the citizens' panel did not entirely echo the views of stakeholders, especially in relation to attitudes about refugees. Generally, the panel were sensitive and sympathetic to the plight of refugees, a little more so than on many previous citizens' panels. But there were some clear concerns. Media stories about young undocumented men arriving into the UK from Calais had clearly impacted the way the group thought about refugees, and some felt that 60 refugees was too many for Shrewsbury. Others felt resentful, not at refugees themselves but felt that refugees are given more support than local people.

Participants generally did not have contact with refugees in their day-to-day lives, and had little understanding of the systems which regulate their legal status. It was clear that the volunteers and organisations who attended our stakeholder meeting were doing a good job to help refugees integrate. But the stakeholder meeting often painted a different picture of attitudes to migration to that which we heard from the citizens' panel.

EU migration

The panel was asked about the changes they would like to see the Government make after the UK leaves the EU. There was a consensus that EU migration must be brought under UK government control with rigorous criminal record checks on future EU migrants. The Australian Points Based System was mentioned as an example of an immigration system that the

panel thought was well controlled, although it was clear that they had little information about how it operated.

“We should know when people arrive at our borders, whether they have got a criminal history or not, cos everyone’s on file these days, so why do we still let them in. I don’t get it, and then we’re in a situation where we can’t get rid of them.....there are people who maybe come in and at some stage in their stay misbehave, but we refuse to get rid of them” (Citizens’ panel participant).

Participants then voted on the options for dealing with EU migration after Brexit. Just over half of the group wanted the Government to set an annual quota for EU nationals working in low-skilled jobs, but retain freedom of movement for those working in high-skilled jobs. Significantly, nearly half of the panel voted to keep freedom of movement for EU nationals, but accompanied by criminal record checks on those who came here.

“To be fair, if anyone is coming over and you’re paying taxes and you’re working you’re welcome, if you’re skilled. But I think we need tighter control over criminals, if you’re being naughty” (Citizens’ panel participant).

Non-EU Migration

Panel members largely had little awareness of the criteria that work, student, or family migrants needed to meet to come to the UK. One panel member who was a senior nurse described the difficulties the local hospital had faced in trying to bring in nurses from the Philippines. The panel felt that migration from outside the EU was generally better controlled than from within the EU, although participants felt that Australia and Canada had better control through the points based system and criminal vetting.

Asylum seekers and refugees

As discussed above, the panel was sympathetic to the plight of refugees, but had some concerns, particularly about migrants and refugees in Calais, which they saw as evidence of a lack of state control over migration flows. Most participants felt that asylum-seekers should be allowed to work so as to help them integrate.

The panel was also asked whether Shropshire should accept more Syrian refugees. Some panel members were happy with this, but others thought that 60 refugees was already too many for Shrewsbury. Others felt resentful, not at refugees themselves, but felt that refugees are given more support than local people.

“I think we should offer refuge for people who are in war zones, for humanity. I think we have to but I also understand that there are some rules about when you’re seeking asylum you’re supposed to do it in the first country you come to, and some of

these countries are a long, long way away from us. So for me who has very positive view towards immigration, it is these aspects which we have no control over. I've been to Calais several times and you see it in the papers all the time and the press and I don't think that British borders have any control whatsoever. And I used to live in Europe, I used to live there when you had to show your passport at every border control in Europe, and now they're no borders apart from when you get to Holland or France and now you can go all the way to the Black Sea without being checked" (Citizens' panel participant).

The panel had little awareness of the processes for claiming asylum, and many believed that there were few checks applied to asylum seekers and refugees.

Border control

As already noted, concerns about a lack of control over some migration flows dominated the discussion in this panel. Generally, most panel members would be willing to pay a little more through taxation for improved immigration controls, although a few participants thought that the immigration system *"was too broken to fix"* and that extra investment would not make a difference without major policy change.

Participants were then given a case study of H, an undocumented migrant from Nigeria who had remained in the UK after overstaying his visa (see appendix). They were asked to decide how the British Government should approach his case. In the discussion most people agreed that H should be allowed to stay, and that it was important to look into each immigration case separately. However analysis of the voting packs showed that three panel members thought his case should be rejected as he had committed a crime by overstaying.

Numbers

The panel voted on whether they wanted different types of migration to be increased, reduced or remain about the same. The panel was fairly equally divided between those who were happy for the numbers of students, family migrants, high-skilled, low-skilled and seasonal workers to be increased, and those who wanted the numbers to stay the same, although the voting packs were qualified with comments such as *"as long as criminals are not let in"*.

Three people wanted the numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees to be reduced, and again requests for criminal vetting were written in the voting packs. Overall, however, concerns about numbers and the pace of change were not voiced by this panel and there were fewer votes for reductions in the numbers of different groups, compared with panels held in other area. As with all other panels, a minority of participants had heard of the net migration target and only one person knew what it was, with

this panel member feeling that it further reduced public trust in politicians.

“It [the net migration target] is something that’s been around for years, we will reduce the numbers by this percent. They haven’t so the target is completely meaningless. Not just this Government but previous ones as well. So if you’re in business and you didn’t meet it you would be out of a job, the politicians are of course exempt from this” (Citizens’ panel participant)

Impact of migration

The panel took a pragmatic approach to migrants who were working in the UK and paying taxes. They felt that as long as there were jobs that needed filling and migrants were paying taxes, they were comfortable with immigration to the UK. Participants largely did not discuss pressures on public services or housing – an issue that has dominated some of the other citizens’ panels we have run. Likely explanations of such views is that there are proportionally few migrants in Shrewsbury, and the town’s population are less likely to feel any impacts on public services than other areas of the UK. Shrewsbury is a relatively wealthy town with fewer people in lower income groups or heavy users of public services.

This panel’s main concern was a lack of criminal vetting of EU and refugee migration into the UK.

Integration

Although the population of migrants in Shrewsbury is small, compared with elsewhere in the UK, most panel participants had work colleagues – although not always friends - who they saw as migrants. In this respect, migration was seen as normal and everyday condition by this panel.

The panel felt that there were few integration problems in Shrewsbury and people generally got on well. Some felt this was because numbers were small in Shrewsbury and new migrants were not clustered in particular parts of town. This is not to say that there were no integration concerns raised by this panel. Many people felt that residential segregation was a problem in the UK, and mentioned Telford and Wolverhampton as places nearby where they felt integration was not working.

Schools were felt to be good at promoting integration and this panel felt that community relations would improve across generations. Fluency in the English language was also an important facilitator of integration as well as work. We put it to the panel that regulations prevented asylum-seekers from working and explained that this rule was passed to minimise potential pull factors to the UK. There was a consensus that asylum-seekers should be allowed to work. Participants also put forward a number of other ideas that they felt would promote integration,

which most of the panel felt was a two-way street.

“Open up opportunities for them to work, if you are working you are going to have to integrate...we need a buddying system for new arrivals, to show them around, this is how Tesco works”
(Citizens’ panel participant).

Panel members also voiced concerns about a minority of new arrivals who they saw as being less unwilling to integrate. It was not clear as to which groups of migrants they saw as not integrating, as no national or religious group were named.

“I feel very positively generally about immigration and I have many friends from different continents so I’m very positive on the whole. But I do think the minority of immigrants do have a really bad influence. I’ve travelled to lots of countries and when I go to other countries I follow their cultures and behave in the way they do.... I appreciate it’s a small group and as I said I’m very positive towards immigration, but if they come to our country and don’t want to live our values and the way that we live, so it’s cultural thing really and I want to impress those are minority groups but they do stick out.”

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. The panel strongly believed that all migration needed to be brought under UK government control. As might be expected, the criminal vetting of would-be migrants featured high in this panel’s list of demands. Two panel members with stronger views also wanted the automatic deportation of migrants who had been convicted of criminal offences.

Panel members also stressed that they wanted all migrants to have jobs and therefore to have National Insurance numbers. As well as enabling migrants to integrate and pay taxes, it was felt that employment enabled migrant workers to be tracked and monitored.

Outside changes that related to vetting, selection, crime and security, the panel felt that all migrants should be working, or be helped to find work, not just to enable them to contribute to the economy, but also to help them integrate.

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the citizens' panel in Shrewsbury were 'balancers', citing the benefits of immigration, alongside what they saw as negative impacts.

The greatest concerns held by this group were migrants flows from the EU, which were seen as uncontrolled and unvetted. While this panel voiced strong opinions about migrant criminality, they were also comfortable for the numbers of low- and high-skilled workers to stay the same or be increased, as long as migrants were vetted, the economy needed them and they were paying taxes.

The discussion was dominated by three 'Cs': control, criminality and contribution. For panel members in Shrewsbury, securing greater support for immigration policy needs to address these three issues.

Appendix

List of stakeholder organisations

Age UK

FRESH

Polish Centre

Refugee Action

Shropshire Council

Shropshire Supports Refugees

Demographics of citizens' panel

Gender	Age	Occupation	Ethnicity
Female	54 years	Office assistant – C1	White British
Female	43 years	Civil servant - B	White British
Female	36 years	Accountant - B	White Irish
Female	38 years	Nursery nurse – C1	White Irish
Female	48 years	Teacher - B	White British
Male	55 years	Ward manager - B	White British
Male	43 years	Logistics manager – C1	White British
Male	49 years	Driver - D	White British
Male	42 years	Fire fighter – C2	White British
Male	44 years	Teacher - B	White British

Case study used in voting packs

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? Should he be given five years legal leave to remain if the Home Office cannot get the Nigerian Government to take him back

Endnotes

1 Annual Population Survey, 2016

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.