



**NATIONAL
CONVERSATION**

**SUTTON COLDFIELD
REPORT
OCTOBER 2017**

CONTEXT

The National Conversation on Immigration visited Sutton Coldfield, a suburb on the north east edge of Birmingham. Historically part of Warwickshire, Sutton became an administrative part of Birmingham in 1974. However, many of Sutton Coldfield's residents do not see their town as part of Birmingham.

Although Sutton Coldfield is now primarily a residential area, the town initially grew in size as a result of its iron and heavy engineering industries. The 19th century saw the further expansion of the town as Birmingham's wealthier residents moved out and settled in Sutton. The arrival of a railway line linking Birmingham and Sutton further cemented the town's position as a prosperous suburb. Today, Sutton Coldfield is the wealthiest constituency within Birmingham. Some 80.9% of Sutton's residents are in work, compared with a West Midlands average of 72% and 52% have higher level qualifications, compared with 31% across the West Midlands¹.

Sutton Coldfield is also the least ethnically diverse part of Birmingham. Among those who live within the boundaries of the constituency, 88% are white British, compared with 59% in Birmingham². Those of Indian ethnicity are the largest minority group, making up about 4% of the population. Small numbers of migrant workers from the EU live and work in the area, some of them moving there from nearby Erdington which has a substantial Polish population.

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. 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 Sutton Coldfield or Erdington. Further demographic information about the panel is given at the end of this report. Basing our conversation on a discussion guide, the panel members 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 Sutton Coldfield panel was largely a well-educated and ethnically diverse group. All of them were ‘balancers’ who believed that migration brought many benefits, but also voiced some concerns, particularly about control and security. Seven of the ten members of the panel had work colleagues who were migrants. Although the media – including social media – was an important source of their views about immigration, this citizens’ panel largely referred to their everyday experiences when discussing immigration. Notably, there was much less repetition of half-remembered media stories and online hearsay than we have heard elsewhere.

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 5.9 with a range from 4 to 8.

All participants felt that migrants undertook essential work and brought in much needed skills. One panel member ran a cafe and talked about the contribution that migrants made to the hospitality sector. Another participant worked in health and social care recruitment and also made reference to the importance of migrant workers. Contribution was raised at different times in the discussion.

“I’m all for if somebody’s contributing to the system, then I think they have a right to live in this country. We let them in and they’re contributing fine. But if there are people here who are not contributing to the system then they should go back to their country. It’s not trying to be too harsh, but I think we need people who are contributing, we can’t have people sucking the land dry so to speak, that’s really I think people should be contributing” (Citizens’ panel participant).

Similar to other citizens’ panels, the Sutton Coldfield participants concerns often focussed on security and control. Participants wanted more background checks on EU migrants and asylum-seekers. But the panel was careful not to blame migrants for negative impacts, instead focussing their criticism on what they saw as “*a broken system*.”

“I don’t think it’s really the case of immigration being the problem, it’s more how people are entering the country and the controls on the people” (Citizens’ panel participant).

Job displacement was another concern of this group – two people were unemployed. But the stakeholder meeting also mentioned that there was resentment to new migrants because they were seen as ‘taking jobs’. (Unemployment is 8.5% in Birmingham, nearly twice the GB average). There was little mention of pressures on public services, compared with many other citizens’ panels.

While this citizens' panel saw immigration working well in Sutton Coldfield, they felt that the same could not be said for parts of Birmingham. Many participants felt that in Birmingham some migrant and minority ethnic groups led separate lives.

"Because you're in Sutton, it's not really in the city, so I don't think we see it as much as some of the inner city, Aston, Hansworth, Erdington, where there's a lot more immigration. Where it concerns me is the integration. Because I work in a school and you see a lot of kids, especially in deprived areas, there are kids that are growing up these days who are quite happy to be apart" (Citizens' panel participant).

EU migration

The panel was asked about the changes they would like to see the Government make after the UK leaves the EU. All participants wanted more controls, with some arguing for criminal record checks. A number of people also suggested that the UK bring in a points based system to regulate EU migration after Brexit.

"There should be set criteria of what they need, it should be a points system, you know, If all boxes are ticked, you can come into the country. I think we should have tighter restrictions on those people, and it should be monitored" (Citizens' panel participant).

Other participants argued for restriction on EU migrants ability to claim benefits and use the NHS until after they had worked and paid taxes.

"There should be restrictions, on the NHS and benefits. You should have been an immigrant for a certain amount of time and you should have paid into the system until you are able to claim. I mean emergency operations that is obviously different they have to take place, but non-emergency procedures you have got to pay" (Citizens' panel participant)..

Participants then voted on the options for dealing with EU migration after Brexit. One person opted to keep the free movement, arguing that this was the least bureaucratic approach for employers. Seven of the citizens' panel wanted the same systems for EU and non-EU migration. Participants felt this was fairer. Some of the panel members had forebears who had migrated from south Asia and the Caribbean and felt that immigration systems should not privilege migrants from EU countries over those from the Commonwealth.

"I think regardless of whether they are skilled or non-skilled or whether they are come from, the EU or Africa or anywhere, it doesn't matter, they should still have to fill the same criteria to get into the country" (Citizens' panel participant).

Non-EU Migration

Migration from outside the EU was a much less salient issue for this citizens' panel. A number of participants talked about the experiences of colleagues who had migrated to the UK to work. Generally, the Sutton Coldfield citizens' panel felt that migration from outside the EU was largely well-controlled. Although there were significant numbers of international students in Birmingham, the Sutton Coldfield citizens' panel did not view this group as migrants, with all participants happy for international student numbers to increase or remain the same.

"There are a lot of restrictions on people from outside of the EU. They can just come in. There are those who are a lot better and probably more qualified but because they've got to jump through a lot of hoops, they can't get in" (Citizens' panel participant),

Asylum seekers and refugees

This citizens' panel took place two weeks after the Parsons Green tube bombing which was perpetrated by an 18 year old Iraqi who had entered the UK as an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child. Security concerns were brought up at a number of points in the discussion and dominated the debate about refugee protection.

Participants believed that the UK should help those fleeing war and persecution. The age-disputed children who were evacuated to the UK from Calais was raised as an example of a lack of vetting and the perceived 'broken system'. Participants believed that those who moved across Europe were attracted to countries such as the UK because of the generosity of the benefits system.

"My biggest gripe with refugees, it's your next safest country and that's where they are meant to stay. If we are taking them directly from refugee camps, that's completely different. You know families, young kids, whatever, god it's heartbreaking, you see Syria and you think Jesus Christ, God, let's help them. But when you see them at Calais and the jungle, and jumping on lorries, the lorry drivers then getting £1,000 fines for no fault of his own, you know it's totally wrong....Where we are at the moment, with terrorism, you see a lot of twenty to thirty year old males, groups of males coming across, there's no checks on them, we don't know anything about them and we're just opening the doors to them" (Citizens' panel participant).

While some participants had strong views about abuse of the asylum system, most of this citizens' panel also believed that more should be done to help asylum-seekers integrate in the UK. The group felt asylum-seekers should be dispersed across the UK to a much greater extent and not just housed in deprived parts of Birmingham and Manchester.

“It’s no good just plonking them in a city, there needs to be a long term plan about how you are going to teach them our language, how are you going to teach them what’s morally right in our country, how are you going to teach them the ways of the world, transport and everything” (Citizens’ panel participant).

Border control

As already noted, concerns about a lack of control over some migration flows dominated the discussion in this panel. Throughout, some participants argued for the greater vetting of would-be migrants and an Australian-style points based system, as well as increased in-country enforcement. At the same time, less than half the group was willing to pay more in taxation for more immigration officers and better use of technology. The main objections to increasing taxation for better immigration control focused on a lack of trust in the government to deliver on its promises.

The citizens’ panel was then presented with the case of H, an undocumented young woman (see appendix). They were asked to decide how the Government should approach her case and whether she and her mother should be allowed to remain in the UK. Participants were divided on how H should be treated, with half of them arguing for her to stay and the rest believing that one or both family members should be removed. Those who wanted to remove this family felt strongly that immigration law should be upheld. Economic and moral arguments were used by those who believed that H should be allowed to stay.

“You can’t be shades of grey with things like this. This is not the time for shades of grey, it’s got to be black and white, it’s certainly saying those are the rules, and that’s the rule.”

“I think the child should be allowed to stay. She’s born and raised here, this is the country that, at the end of the day she’s British, if she’s born and raised here, she’s 19 years old, she didn’t have a say” (Citizens’ panel participants).

Numbers

The panel voted on whether they wanted different types of migration to be increased, reduced or remain about the same. The majority wanted the number of students and highly-skilled migrants to be increased or to remain the same. For family migrants and low-skilled and seasonal workers about half of the group wanted reductions in numbers with the remainder believing numbers should stay about the same. As already discussed, the Sutton Coldfield citizens’ panel had strongly-voiced security concerns about refugees and this was reflected in their desire to reduce refugee numbers.

Participants then discussed the net migration target. Only one person had heard of the target, but he did not what it comprised.

When the net migration target was explained, participants felt that the inclusion of such diverse groups into one overall number was meaningless. If the Government was to have targets, some participants argued that they had to relate to individual jobs.

“We must know from this calculation, we’re going to lose 100 nurses then we need 100 nurses back in” (Citizens’ panel participant).

Impact of migration

Compared with many citizens’ panels there was comparatively little concern about the impact of migration on public services and housing, although a few participants felt that migration risked displacing UK residents from the labour market. This may reflect the lower numbers of new migrants who moved into Sutton Coldfield.

Integration

All participants who were currently working said that they had migrants among their friends and work colleagues. This citizens’ panel felt that community relations were good in Sutton Coldfield, people from different backgrounds got along and that integration generally worked well. But they saw Sutton Coldfield as distinct from Birmingham and felt that integration was not working so well in the more deprived parts of Birmingham.

“If you ask some people about Birmingham they think it’s the other side of the world so we do live in our own little micro-climate here” (Citizens’ panel participant).

Participants talked about ethnic clustering and residential segregation in Birmingham. Some of them felt that where one ethnic or faith group came to dominate an area, those who were not from this group might move away.

“If you go to somewhere like Erdington or Birmingham Star City, every single restaurant in Star City is Halal - only because the majority of the population are there are Asian. But if you have lived there all your life and you don’t want to go to a Halal restaurant, you want to go to a normal restaurant, they’re almost pushing you away” (Citizens’ panel participant).

All the participants thought that residential segregation in Birmingham was very marked and that levels of integration in the city were low. At the same time, they understood why this situation had arisen and some of the causes of this segregation lay in the availability of affordable housing.

Unanimously, this citizens’ panel thought that being in work was an essential component of integration. Learning English was seen as just as important. Some participants mentioned that they had personally struggled to communicate with migrants on buses or in the street, while others were more concerned about the impact on school resources when interpreters are needed in

classes to help new arrivals understand their lessons.

“I do think if people are coming into our country, they should embrace our laws, what our values are, and most of all speak our language” (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. This citizens’ panel put forward a number of well-argued proposals which included:

- Less political spin and a cross-party consensus on future policy
- Tighter enforcement of existing policy
- Criminal vetting
- A compulsory English language test for would-be migrants
- Better Government planning, informed by more detailed statistics about those immigrating and emigrating, and
- More support and planning for migrant integration.

“We need better integration, I think there has to be a plan for someone from whatever country it is, if they’re coming in, are we going to get to the point where they are a British citizen, where they feel confident that they are a British citizen and can integrate into society” (Citizens’ panel participant).

CONCLUSIONS

All members of the Sutton Coldfield citizens' panel were balancers who felt migration had brought many benefits to the UK and to the local area, but also had concerns, mostly about security and control as well as integration. Many of their opinions were not formed by what they saw in Sutton, but on their impressions from visiting or working in Birmingham. Participants' views tended to be informed by everyday experiences and this realistic and grounded panel put forward a number of practical solutions to make immigration work better for everyone.

Appendix

List of stakeholder organisations

Asylum Matters

BRAP

Hope Projects

Restore

The Polish Expat Association

Demographics of citizens' panels

Gender	Age	Occupation	Ethnicity
Female	24 years	Administrator – C1	White British
Female	33 years	Unemployed	Asian British
Female	68 years	Retired	White British
Female	61 years	Retired	White British
Female	18 years	Student	White British
Male	27 years	Recruitment consultant – C1	Black British
Male	44 years	Fire fighter – C2	White British
Male	41 years	Manager in hospitality sector - B	White British
Male	25 years	Unemployed	White British
Male	35 years	Learning mentor – C1	Black British

Case study used in voting packs

H is 19 years old and was born in the UK to a Nigerian mother and a Jamaican father. H's mother arrived in the UK with a five year work visa, but overstayed this visa when it ran out in 2001, when H was two years old. H and her mother have had no contact with her H's father since H was four. She has no address for him and does not know if he is still living in the UK.

H and her mother have lived in rented rooms as long as she can remember and her mother has worked as a cleaner. Growing up H was aware that they had much less money than most other families. When H was 14 she was cautioned for shop lifting – she tried to steal clothes from an Oxford Street shop.

H did not know she was not legally in the UK until she was 17 and wanted to apply for university. She then found out that she was an undocumented migrant. This caused a lot of tension between her and her mother. H has subsequently found it that she and her mother can apply for leave to remain in the UK for compassionate reasons. However, coming forward and doing this is risky: as H is no longer a child, her mother risks being

deported, even if H is given permission to stay. H does not want to be separated from her mother, but she has never been to Nigeria and does not wish to live there.

How should the UK government treat H?

Endnotes

1. Annual Population Survey, 2016.
2. Birmingham City Council (2015) *Sutton Coldfield Constituency: economic and employment profile*, Birmingham: Birmingham City Council.

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.

