



**NATIONAL  
CONVERSATION**

**WOLVERHAMPTON  
REPORT**

**JUNE 2017**

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# CONTEXT

The National Conversation on Immigration visited Wolverhampton, a city of 256,000 and unitary authority that lies north east of Birmingham. It is now part of the West Midlands Combined Authority. A market town that grew throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Wolverhampton became a major centre for coal mining, iron and steel production, the manufacture of cars, bikes and motorcycles, as well as other types of engineering. Although much of its manufacturing base has now been relocated overseas, the engineering sector is still a significant employer in Wolverhampton, although the economy is dominated by the service sector.

While there has been recent investment in the city, and the economy is increasingly diverse, unemployment remains a problem in Wolverhampton. Figures estimate that 7.6% of the working age population are unemployed, higher than both the national and West Midlands average<sup>1</sup>. More than one in ten people of working age are also economically inactive due to long-term ill-health.

Wolverhampton has a long and enduring history of immigration. By 1851, one in eight people were Irish. In the years after the Second World War, Wolverhampton became home to many Commonwealth migrants and the city's population continues to reflect this settlement. Wolverhampton has the second highest percentage of Sikh residents in the UK, accounting for 9% of Wolverhampton's population<sup>2</sup>. At the time of the 2011 census, 64.5% of residents were of white British ethnicity, 17.5% were of Asian ethnicity and 6.9% were black. The history of migration to Wolverhampton has not been easy, however, and accounts of discrimination have been reported with each wave of migration to the city. Enoch Powell was the MP for Wolverhampton South West from 1950-1974 and drew from his observations in his constituency for his infamous 'rivers of blood' speech made in Birmingham in April 1968. There was opposition to his speech in Wolverhampton and wider and Powell was sacked as shadow defence secretary.

More recent migration has further changed the ethnic composition of Wolverhampton, although the majority of those from minority ethnic groups can still trace their roots to the Commonwealth. Today, 18.7% of the population of Wolverhampton were born outside the UK, including a growing population of migrant workers from eastern Europe. Over the last 20 years, significant numbers of asylum-seekers and refugees have settled in Wolverhampton, and just under 800 asylum-seekers were housed and supported by the Home Office in March 2017. The city has also agreed to take in 100 Syrians through the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. Wolverhampton is also home to number of international students.

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Some London local authorities have also moved homeless families to Wolverhampton, with many of them living in the same streets of private rental accommodation used to house asylum-seekers. This practice – undertaken without any liaison with Wolverhampton City Council – has further added to the growing super-diversity of Wolverhampton.

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# WHAT WE DID

A stakeholder meeting was held with 17 representatives from local organisations. We 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. It was further asked about policy changes that would better address local issues.

Later, 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 Wolverhampton and further demographic information about the group 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.

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# 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', with responses averaging at 7.1, with a range from 5 to 10. The panel generally thought that migration had brought more benefits than disadvantages, often drawing on personal and family experiences.

*"There aren't many people here who can say that their family going back generations and their blood is 100%.... Because my Dad came over here when he was 25, and married a local woman, I can see both sides of the question. I think there have been more positives than negatives, overall, but that its about maintaining a balance too. Too much of anything can be an issue too. It's good that people get that chance to make a life here, but then my Dad could find himself on a long NHS waiting list too. So I find that I can swing both ways on this issue, depending on who I am sitting with"* (Citizens' panel participant).

It is often assumed that those with the most pro-migration attitudes are mostly young, metropolitan graduates. The Wolverhampton panel, however, were mostly non-graduates for whom immigration was part of everyday life in the city. This shows that support for migration is not only confined to younger and better educated cohorts of the population. Immigration was not something that this citizens' panel spoke about often, and for most it was seen as a very normal process, and an integral part of Wolverhampton's identity. However, the panel felt that shock events such as the recent terror attacks, or exposure of negative stories in the media triggered conversations about immigration.

- *Is immigration something you talk about often, when with friends and family?*
- *It depends if it's on TV, if there's a TV show, or something on the news 'Oh my god, those damn immigrants, always taking our jobs', and then it just becomes a whole discussion, but if you just run into someone, it's not something you would really talk about* (Citizens' panel participant).

Some of the citizens' panel took measures to avoid confrontation on immigration issues: *"I've never unfriended so many people with all this election stuff going on"*. Others were wary of being labelled as racist for talking about immigration, and felt that the boundaries of a decent conversation were unclear. However, the conversation we had in Wolverhampton was generally open and constructive.

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The citizens' panel voiced frustrations with the way some talked about immigration on social media, or how they saw it represented in the media. The Express and Star, Wolverhampton's local newspaper, was seen to project a negative view of immigration which both groups felt was unfair and unrealistic.

Despite local newspaper and social media coverage, Wolverhampton was seen by both the citizens' panel and stakeholders to be a place where most people got on with each other and welcomed newcomers. Wolverhampton had come a long way since the days of Enoch Powell, and participants felt there had been a shift in attitudes to immigration and diversity across the generations. This partly reflect greater expose to ethnic diversity, as well as changing norms of behaviour.

*"I think there has been a big change across the generation. I went to school there were one or two Asian children in the school. Now it's much more mixed"* (Citizens' panel participant).

Both groups felt that generally, people in Wolverhampton got along well although there were 'hotspots' of racism and violent extremism. The English Defence League and Britain First were mentioned as groups who had been active in the local area and there were also still places where newcomers and those from minority ethnic groups were not made to feel welcome.

*"On the whole most people get on, but if you go to certain areas, and scratch the surface it [racism] will be there"* (Citizens' panel participant).

Stakeholders felt that some of the negative attitudes to immigration emerged from rapid cultural change. The changing face of shops in the area was mentioned, whereby small supermarkets which had been run by British Asians for the last few decades were being taken over by Eastern Europeans, unsettling some of the local population, including minority ethnic communities. Others felt that cuts to public services caused resentment towards new communities as people often felt something had been taken from them by new arrivals.

## **EU migration**

The panel was asked about the changes they would like to see the Government make after the UK leaves the EU. Participants then voted on the options for dealing with EU migration after Brexit. The majority of the panel wanted the same regulations to EU nationals as those from outside the EU, and justified this view in terms of fairness and equality.

*"Everyone should have the same restrictions. We have left the EU, so shouldn't it be the same for all countries"* (Citizens' panel participant).

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Through these questions, it was clear that many did not fully understand the current free movement regulations surrounding EU and non-EU migration. Some were concerned about the impact this would have in their own lives, and some people thought that nationals of Commonwealth countries had the same freedom to come to the UK as EU nationals.

Stakeholders were concerned about the effects of restrictions to EU migration on local businesses and the NHS felt that the pool of local labour did not contain the skills necessary to support the economy and public services. Major infrastructure projects were mentioned as areas which would require migrant labour- both skilled and manual labourers, which could be fielded from the EU.

### **Non-EU Migration**

International students were not viewed as migrants by this panel, and the discussion focussed on non-EU work and family migration. The citizens' panel in Wolverhampton had a better knowledge of non-EU migration systems than most other places we have visited. Many had experience non-EU visa systems first hand or through friends or family which offered an interesting discussion.

Once again, the group's conversation centred round notions of equality and fairness. Some participants were happy with the way that non-EU visa systems currently operate. Others voiced frustrations with the way that family and friends had been treated, while acknowledging that it must be difficult for the government to balance the need for control with the costs and red tape experienced by applicants. Many participants - of white, black and Asian ethnicity - felt it was wrong to offer preferential treatment to those from the EU over those from Commonwealth countries.

*"I wouldn't say I'm happy with it. I go along with it. It's fairly tricky, there's a lot to it, when we have to apply for visa. It's all stuff like 12 months bank statements, certain amount of money shown in your account, like your work history. My wife had to show previously, for the last six years before she actually applied for a visa, any gaps in there she had to prove where she was, what she was doing. So, I think there's no real reason for it to be so strict but at the same time it can't be easy, it's a tricky one, I don't really have the answer to tell the truth"* (Citizens' panel participant)

Frustrations with Tier 2 and family visas also emerged in the stakeholder meetings, as they have done elsewhere in the country.

### **Asylum seekers and refugees**

The citizens' panel had mixed views about the asylum system

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and the impact of dispersal on the city. Many participants had met asylum seekers or refugees, although others felt that *“you don’t see anything, they’re fairly invisible... there are asylum seekers living in the flat next door and you wouldn’t know”*.

There was an undercurrent of sympathy for those fleeing war and persecution, although the group was divided as to whether Wolverhampton should take more than 100 Syrian refugees. It was clear that the panel were not comfortable with asylum-seekers who had been dispersed to Wolverhampton by the Home Office. Some participants felt confused or threatened by large groups of young, single men housed in the city.

*“Most refugees, they are not children. They are not women who are vulnerable, they are middle aged men looking for money, who could manage in the country – they leave behind their families, to then come and seek something for themselves”* (Citizens’ panel participant).

The movement of refugees across Europe and conditions in the Calais camp were concerns that were brought up by panel members. The movement of refugees across Europe was seen as evidence that refugees were being drawn to the UK by its generous benefits. Panel members felt that the age-disputed young people who were evacuated from Calais to the UK was in confirmation of a lack of vetting of asylum claims.

*“I think there’s good and bad. You get a lot of vulnerable people who need to go somewhere. but then you get a lot of people in Calais for example, smashing lorry windows, ... in France so why are they so desperate to come to England?”* (Citizens’ panel participant).

## **Border control**

Despite a desire for fairer rules governing non-EU migration, some citizens’ panel participants voiced concerns about what they saw as lax border controls, which they felt allowed in undocumented migrants and foreign national criminals.

*“What I think is that I think that any government have turned a blind eye for many, many years and I’m thinking of the tens of thousands of people who are living in this country, who are not paying taxes or whatever else, but are taking advantage ... I’m talking about people who have been here for a very long time, who are unknown to anyone, to the police, the government, to anyone”* (Citizens’ panel participant).

Despite these concerns, the majority of panel members would be unwilling to pay £5 per year more in tax for improved border control. Participants put forward a number of different arguments to justify their decision. For one person, a larger Home Office budget would result in more detention and removal and other practices that she thought were a violation of migrants’ rights.

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Other panel members believed that the NHS and education should be prioritised for additional public spending, over the Home Office, while others argued for cuts to ‘wasteful’ areas of public spending. While there are public concerns about the effectiveness of border controls, the arguments put forward by this panel show that the public does not necessarily support an increased Home Office budget.

*“My priorities would not be with the immigration system. It would be with the NHS, or the social care, the amount of homes and disability places that have been closed down. My mum works in social care, she says at the minute it’s been cut to shreds. They’ve got nothing left really, there’s so few facilities to help people. I’d rather spend my £5 there”* (Citizens’ panel participant).

The discussion then moved on to detention and deportation, prompted by a participant who had seen a television documentary about immigration enforcement. Two panel members felt that the detention and removal of migrants was sometimes a breach of human rights. Again, views about economic contribution influenced participants’ opinions on deportation.

*“It always depends on the circumstances. Obviously if it’s hard working people then it’s completely unfair [to deport them]. But say for example it’s was a criminal, then it’s different. throw him on the plane”* (Citizens’ panel participant).

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, all but one person felt that H should be allowed to stay. Participants argued for compassion, and for individual decisions to be made on a case-by-case basis. Views about economic contribution also influenced participants’ decisions.

*“He should stay, each case should be treated individually. He has not claimed benefits. He has no family back home to send money back, therefore the money is staying in the country”* (Citizens’ panel participant).

## **Numbers**

The panel voted on whether they wanted different types of migration to be increased, reduced or remain about the same. Just two people voted for the numbers of any group migrants to be reduced, with most of the panel feeling that numbers should remain the same. Some voiced concerns about unemployed people in the UK and made demands for a better system for helping people back into work, but in general the panel understood that any sharp increase or reduction in immigration should be mediated by the needs of employers. Overall, the

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citizens' panel in Wolverhampton had fewer concerns about numbers and the pace of migration than most other places we have visited. No 'crowded island arguments were put forward at any time in the discussion.

Just one member of the Wolverhampton panel had heard of the net migration target. A lack of awareness of this policy is common to most citizens' panels. Participants were divided about the value of targets. Some wanted an overall target while other panel members wanted different targets for different groups of people. Other participants argued against setting numerical targets, for a few people immigration statistics were innately inaccurate or untrustworthy. Throughout the discussion the panel frequently raised points about "invisibles" or the number of undocumented migrants "lost" in the system. This is a concern that has been consistent across the UK.

*"I think separately, I wouldn't go for one big group, because I think each and every group brings a different something to the country. Different targets should be set, depending. Are there lots of high skilled jobs available? Then set the target a bit higher, Are there loads of low-skilled jobs available? Then set the target higher for that. There should be a different target for asylum seekers as well. I would put them in different groups, because everyone brings something different to the country"* (Citizens' panel participant).

### **Impact of migration**

Many participants on Wolverhampton panel balanced positive and negative local impacts. Most of the panel felt that the cultural diversity brought to the city through immigration was not just a benefit, but was normalised to the extent that it has become part of the city's identity.

The panel appreciated the economic contribution made by migrants, filling jobs that were unpopular with British people and contributing their skills to the NHS. But they also felt that EU migration had negative impacts on local wages, working conditions and the availability of part-time work for students. Participants differentiated Wolverhampton as an economically vulnerable, post-industrial area which coped differently with migration to larger, wealthier cities such as Birmingham or Manchester which the group felt were more resilient to these impacts. Stakeholders also drew attention to the impacts immigration had on wages and working conditions and felt that the exploitation of Eastern European migrants had contributed to this. Some of them asked for better regulation of working rights and monitoring of employers to ensure conditions were improved for all. Both the citizens' panel and the stakeholders felt that economic concerns in Wolverhampton reach beyond immigration.

*"I work with students now who are desperately looking for jobs."*

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*They've put in so many CVs to so many places, even for low-skilled over the summer just to tide them over while they're doing their degrees. People signing on and on and say they can't find a job, if we've got so many unemployed people in this country, why aren't we giving them the jobs and insisting that they actually go out and do this job?"* (Citizens' panel participant).

## Integration

As already noted, the citizens' panel felt most people got along well in Wolverhampton, although there were still tensions in some places and new arrivals in some areas were not always made to feel welcome. In both the citizens' panel and the stakeholder meeting, there was a sense that the city of Wolverhampton felt itself to be a place of diversity and contact – but that the outer suburbs could be more distant from that. There was a danger that new migrants to the city might integrate well into settled migrant and ethnic minority communities, without having social contact with those who live in the less diverse areas of the city.

There was now an inclusive civic identity that embraced Wolverhampton's history of migration and diversity as well as the presence of minority ethnic groups from the Commonwealth. Migrants who had arrived in the past were now well integrated, although participants felt that integration is a process that can take several generations. The panel agreed that schools were doing a good job and that children mixing could be a gateway to better community relations. However, there were concerns that faith schools added to the segregation of communities.

*"When it is the first generation, from personal experience, they come over and keep to themselves. It's only when the children are going to school, they are being educated and there is integration. They are in the system of education, English becoming the first language. When they go home they still speak their own language, but that will tend to disappear in the second and third generation, there is a lot more integration afterwards"* (Citizens' panel participant).

The panel supported mechanisms for settled communities and new migrants to mix and get to know each other, through working or learning together but also events such as street parties. They talked about the value of people getting to know their own neighbours – while worrying that a combination of spending cuts and reduced civic society activity could make that more difficult. Many participants felt that a sense of community had been lost and felt nostalgic for the 1970s and 80s.

*"Community is the best thing. You can socialise, you can get to know each other, you don't have to hate or discriminate"* (Citizens' panel participant).

Stakeholders also felt that integration worked well in the city,

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although through the discussion it became clear that this was generally seen as integration between different migrant populations. They, too warned that integration that didn't always reach the suburbs. Stakeholders described a number of positive civil society programmes which encouraged integration and felt that faith groups, and churches and mosques in particular, were doing a good job to ensure new communities settled in well to their neighbourhoods. Tensions today were more likely to be around faith than race, but we also heard how faith leaders in the city had worked hard to build good relationships across people from different ethnic and faith backgrounds. One contributor to our stakeholder roundtable felt this had been a positive outcome of the intense political controversies over immigration in the city and region in the 1960s and 1970s.

*"I think there was an extra effort to bring people together – because of that legacy from the time of Enoch: there was a sense that this was not what we all wanted Wolverhampton to be known for" (Stakeholder).*

### **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. From this discussion, it was apparent that general levels of trust in the Government and the political system were low, and the group were critical of portrayals of immigration on media and social media. As with many other panels, there was a demand for greater transparency and political accountability. Other panel members argued for better Government planning.

*"I think we need transparency. We have access to see actually what changes are taking place, what are the facts and figures. Again there's that question of will they be fabricated, are they going to be real? Actually doing what they say they're going to do, because up till now, everything's contradicted" (Citizens' panel participant).*

Overall the group made it clear that people wanted to be listened to by decision makers, and had valued having a conversation about immigration:

*"I think it's just listening to people a little bit more, listening to people on the right, listening to people on the left, listening to people in the middle and just putting the ideas together and see what we can come up with" (Citizens' panel participant).*

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# CONCLUSIONS

For many of Wolverhampton's residents, migration is a normal part of everyday life. Those who have arrived in the past are largely well-integrated into the life of the city. Relations between different ethnic groups are generally good and our citizens' panel gave us a clear account of why the Wolverhampton of 2017 understood itself to be a very different place from the time of Enoch Powell's infamous speech in April 1968.

Recent EU migration was not the major issue of concern as it has been in other towns and cities, nor were there anxieties about numbers. However, local stakeholders may need to consider how better to improve the social integration of asylum-seekers and refugees. There was an undercurrent of sympathy for those fleeing war and persecution, but it was clear that some panel members felt confused and threatened by large groups of young male asylum-seekers housed in the city.

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## Appendix

### List of stakeholder organisations

Ashley Community Housing  
City of Sanctuary – Wolverhampton  
Humans of Wolverhampton  
Refugee and Migrant Centre  
West Midlands Ambulance Service  
Wolverhampton City Council  
Wolverhampton TUC  
Woman of Wolverhampton

### Demographics of citizens' panels

Male	23 years old	Electrician - C2	White British
Male	31 years old	Security Guard - D	White British
Male	48 years old	Landscape Gardener - C2	Black British
Female	32 years old	Retail - C1	Asian British
Female	36 years old	Health Mentor - B	Asian British
Female	55 years old	Communications Coordinator - B	White British
Female	27 years old	Nurse - C1	White British
Female	21 years old	Student - C1	Other White
Female	61 years old	Badminton Coach - C2	Other White
Male	23 years old	Support Worker - D	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.

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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, April 2016-March 2017
- 2 Census 2011. Sikhs make up 0.8% of the population of England.

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## 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.

