

EU Migrant Communities

Integration, Brexit and Covid-19

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ACH

Introduction

EU migrant communities make up a very significant population in many local authority areas, including Bristol, and have been impacted by Brexit and major changes in the immigration system as well as the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet it can be argued that the needs of these communities have had relatively limited attention from policy makers and others. In this report, ACH aims to draw attention to this gap, and outline next steps for action.

'People from other EU member states are an important part of our community. Yet they have been badly hit by Covid and by Brexit. I want to acknowledge the huge contribution they have made to our economy and our society over recent years and especially during the pandemic. We need them to stay and to make sure we are making the full use of their skills and talents to help us rebuild a better city.'

Asher Craig, Deputy Mayor of Bristol

'Romanians as well as all other EU member state citizens have contributed significantly to virtually all aspects of the UK's social and economic life.

Despite their high skills and expertise in various domains, much of these contributions have been made through low skilled, precarious and often undervalued work. This is detrimental not only for themselves but also for the wider community as it loses access to their skills and experience. The work ACH has done marks an important step in highlighting and addressing this reality. I hope we can build on and take positive steps to tackle it.'

Dr Razvan Constantinescu, Honorary Consul-General of Romania in the South West of England

About ACH

ACH is an award-winning social enterprise providing a range of innovative and impactful support and integration services for newly arrived communities. Since 2008, we have resettled over 2500 individuals a year by providing secure housing, culturally sensitive support and vocational training.

We focus on building individuals' resilience in the labour market, upskilling and supporting refugees and migrants into sustainable, higher-level employment to develop their independence and help their integration into UK life. We now employ over 80 members of staff and deliver services in the West of England and the West Midlands whilst offering advice and assistance across the UK and beyond.





What is integration?

Integration can often be confused with assimilation within public discourse. However, integration should not be seen as a prescriptive top down framework that assesses individuals against a fixed check list. Instead, integration should be about individual aspiration and about pathways through which individuals from all backgrounds can have equal opportunities to fulfil their potential and contribute to society.¹

This has been explored through the work undertaken by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded “Everyday Integration” Project led by the University of Bristol and through the work by ACH with refugees as outlined in a recent seminar organised through Migration and Mobilities Bristol.

Who are EU migrant communities?

Migrants from European Union member states have become a major element of our society over recent years.

In 2004, the EU underwent a significant enlargement when a number of states from Central and Eastern Europe became new members; The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic and Bulgaria and Romania a few years later.

After that date, significant numbers of people moved to the UK to seek employment, in what was then a rapidly growing economy. This was possible by the freedom of movement of labour, an integral part of the EU Single Market, of which the UK was a strong advocate. More than one million registered for the Workers Registration Scheme in the following year with many not registering and others arriving in later years up to the 2016 Brexit referendum. The 2011 census showed that Polish was the most widespread foreign language spoken in the UK, used at that time by 546,000 people (this will likely have increased in the 2021 census).²

The European Union Settlement Scheme (EUSS) through which EU migrants must now register following Brexit, has received well over 5 million applications, reflecting the very significant size of these communities now in the UK. Of this number some 980,000 are of Polish background and 930,000 Romanian.³ Although these communities are concentrated in cities of different sizes such as Birmingham (116,000), Coventry (49,000), Bristol (49,000), Oxford (29,000) and Plymouth (10,000) there are also proportionately significant numbers in more rural areas for example, South Oxfordshire (7,850), South Hams (Devon) (1,500) and East Suffolk (2,200).⁴

There are also significant numbers of people from “older” EU member states also living and working in the UK, for example just over EUSS 500 000 from applications from citizens of Italy, 376 000 from Portugal and 320 000 from Spain. However our recent work has focussed primarily on those from the newer member states.

EU migrants are mostly of working age with approx. 81% being between 18 and 65. They have become especially important within some key sectors of the economy and heavily represented in the hospitality sector (13%), transport and storage (13%) and health and social care (15%) as well as in construction, agriculture and IT.⁵



What has been the impact of Brexit and Covid-19?

The referendum on EU membership in 2016, the withdrawal agreement which followed and the accompanying changes in immigration law have had a significant impact on these communities. The EUSS application process, which must be followed by EU state nationals in order to retain the right to work and to access services, has created uncertainty and vulnerability. Migration from the EU was placed at the centre of the “leave” campaign during the EU referendum and together with other factors has led many from these communities to feel unwelcome and unappreciated.

Covid-19 and the related regulations and lockdowns have also severely impacted on EU migrant workers through the effect the pandemic has had for sectors of the economy where EU migrant workers are often employed. This includes hospitality, care, transport, distribution, construction and agriculture. In some cases the impact of the pandemic led to jobs being lost or levels of income reduced (e.g. the closedown of restaurants, bars and hotels) and in other cases higher exposure to Covid-19 itself (e.g. through high levels of Covid-19 infections in care homes).

As a consequence of Brexit and Covid-19 many EU migrants have left the UK, with estimates suggesting up to 1.3 million EU migrants have departed the UK since the 2016 referendum.⁶ Those who remain are often reluctant to engage and feel their status is temporary and uncertain. For example just over 50% of people from these communities are registered to vote compared with 86% of all UK citizens⁷ registered to vote and over 70% of migrants from Commonwealth backgrounds. Furthermore, a survey showed that one in four felt that they

‘Many however still feel that as hard working individuals who contribute much whilst making few political demands or claims on public services, that they must ultimately be allowed to succeed and prosper in the UK.’

were not currently treated equally with British citizens and one in two believe that this would become a problem in the future. The integration needs of these communities have arguably fallen between ‘mainstream’ service provision and those of other minority groups (e.g. the recent badly needed focus on overcoming barriers faced by BAME communities also been badly neglected).

Experiences from everyday life can also cause problems, with migrant communities reporting feeling unwanted, being the recipients of negative remarks from work colleagues or neighbours and wanting to keep a low profile within the wider community.^{8,9} It was felt by some that in the worst case scenario of moving back to their home country or to a third EU member state would be a realistic option. However, for others with children at school, work and other commitments this would be less possible. However many still feel that as hard working individuals who contribute much whilst making few political demands or claims on public services, that they must ultimately be allowed to succeed and prosper in the UK.

These communities have made a very significant contribution to the local economy and the city. As a global city we should aim to motivate EU migrant communities to remain, feel welcome and prosper. What are the consequences and next steps for ensuring better integration for these communities? Whilst this situation reflects national level policy decisions, what can be done at local and regional level to mitigate this situation? We can look at three different aspects of integration including the EUSS process and risk of NRPF; labour market progression and economic opportunity and civic and community engagement.



No Recourse to Public Funds

There is a risk of a significant number becoming destitute and having No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF).

Precarious employment has exposed many EU migrants to the risk of destitution and potential NRPF for some time. This was revealed by street sleeper counts during the Covid-19 lockdown, with around 40 people in this situation in Bristol. Many are only a couple of steps away from losing work, housing and access to other services. The post-Brexit EUSS process will further exacerbate this situation.¹⁰

The deadline for EUSS passed on the 30th June and it is likely that many thousands failed to apply or applied incorrectly. Certain groups are more at risk, such as older people, those with poor digital and literacy skills and people of third country origin (such as refugees who had attained status in another member state and moved to the UK).¹¹ Some applications were refused or classed as invalid (2% of Polish applicants and 4% of Romanians).

Furthermore, of those whose EUSS applications have been determined, a significant number have been awarded EUSS Pre Settled Status. This includes 10% of applicants from Polish backgrounds and more than 60% of those of Romanian origin. Pre settled status permits a person to remain in the UK for a further 5 year period after which further steps are needed to stay. If these steps are not followed, EU migrants face major risks to their rights.¹²

The EUSS process risks many thousands of people from EU migrant communities becoming destitute and having NRPF. This would be unacceptable from a humanitarian viewpoint, could seriously disrupt the labour market and would also place financial obligations (for example in looking after children) on local authorities.



Next steps?

On going accessible community level advice on legal, migration and other topics to be facilitated by local authorities. Campaign / policy engagement to build greater flexibility into the national legal framework for EU migrants to live and work in the UK and to disengage the process from the risk and threat of NRPF.

Precarious Employment

Many EU migrant workers are employed in sectors characterised in part by precarious work.

Many from these communities are in precarious employment meaning low levels of pay, lack of guaranteed working hours, poor job security and protection. In some cases business models include “forced” self-employment status via the gig economy.¹³

Many EU migrant workers are employed in sectors which are vital components of our economy and that are sometimes characterised by precarious work such as hospitality, care, distribution, construction and agriculture.

Often individuals are working at jobs well below their capability in relation to qualifications and experience. About 50% of highly educated workers born in new member states work in low skilled occupations and workers from these countries are more likely to be engaged in low skilled / entry level jobs than other population groups.¹⁴

This is especially a problem where there is little prospect of career development or labour market progression as research has suggested that refugee and migrant communities often find it difficult to move on from precarious work.

Dependence on precarious work is bad for the individuals concerned making access to decent housing and public services as well as engagement in civic society more difficult and also increasing the risk of impoverishment and destitution. It is also bad for the wider economy and labour market losing the full application of skills and experience and reducing added value and productivity.

There are also many small businesses established by EU migrants many of which may struggle following Brexit and Covid-19. For example more than 22000 enterprises set up by people of Polish origin in the UK.¹⁵



Next steps?

Target and market existing training, career development and labour market progression schemes more effectively within EU communities, for example through use of community volunteers. We also need to review small business support schemes in the same way. The focus must be on key sectors currently suffering from recruitment and retention problems (such as hospitality).

We need to identify where gaps in provision may require new schemes or new funding arrangements. This may be most effectively done by community based organisations (such as ACH) working with mainstream providers such as local authorities.

Community and civil engagement

Post-Brexit and Covid-19, it has never been more important that localities are open to the world.

We need strong economic opportunity through trade, tourism, investment and cultural links. Diaspora communities have huge potential to facilitate economic opportunity following Brexit through trade, tourism, investment and cultural links. EU8 and EU2 countries have mostly experienced high economic growth in recent years and represent a potential market of around 100 million people almost on our doorstep. That is one significant region why it is in our wider interest as well as in the interest of those concerned that they feel fully engaged within communities and civil society.

The current position of EU migrant communities, the EUSS process and the proposed post-Brexit immigration system all risk creating a society in which a significant number of people are long term workers and yet not citizens, existing with restricted rights and opportunities. This cannot be a sound basis for integration or inclusion which focuses on equal opportunities for all to fulfil their aspirations and to contribute to society. It risks creating permanent fractures in our localities.

What can be done locally to mitigate this situation? Information about and access to public services for EU migrants requires greater consideration. This includes translation of materials, adjustment of messaging and distribution channels (e.g. social media and community networks). Beyond communication flows, greater public recognition of the role and contribution of EU communities is needed. We need mechanisms for dialogue that enhances a sense of belonging and commitment. This should cause higher levels of involvement in community and civic life, such as participation in voting, standing for election, campaigning and community level activities.

There are a range of stakeholders from the community sector, diaspora bodies, researchers and local government who have a strong commitment, capacity and knowledge to enhance the integration of EU migrant communities even without a more benign national policy framework.



Next steps?

We need to examine practical mechanisms to communicate with EU migrant communities about EUSS and how to access public services more generally. We must take steps to more overtly acknowledge the contribution of migrant communities through events and activities by local government and political leaders. Establishing a network or forum of key stakeholders to build capacity and articulate a voice around key issues would make a difference.

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