

New Summary.

Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland Summary of Preliminary Findings

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Migrant workers have become an increasingly visible social group within Northern Irish society over the past few years. However little was known about the number of people moving to Northern Ireland to work, or indeed about the sectors of work that were attracting migrant workers. In addition little was known about the demands these changes placed upon statutory bodies or about the specific problems faced by migrant workers as they established themselves in Northern Ireland.

This report was commissioned by the Equality Directorate Research Unit of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to address some of the gaps in our knowledge about migrant workers. It aims to provide base line data, to identify gaps in information and service provision and to identify social problems and personal needs experienced by people moving to Northern Ireland to take up employment.

The research employed a variety of methodologies to address these aims. ICR collated data and statistics from a range of government departments and statutory agencies; interviewed a number of people working for statutory, voluntary and community organisations; conducted a survey and interviews with migrant workers. ICR also spoke with a number of employers and employers organisations and carried out a review of literature on migrant workers in Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

Having reviewed the literature a simple definition was adopted of a migrant worker: 'an individual who arrives in the host country either with a job to go to or with the intention of finding one'. Citizens of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland working in Northern Ireland were excluded from our study.

Categories

There are a number of different and distinct categories of migrant workers or non-nationals who have varying rights to work in Northern Ireland. The main categories are as follows:

- Nationals of the European Economic Area who have a right to travel, live and work in the UK.
- Nationals of all other countries: who require a work permit, which is obtained by an employer who cannot find a suitable national to fill a post.
- Nationals of Switzerland and British Overseas Territories and people employed in a limited number of activities, who require clearance to enter the UK but do not require a work permit.
- Commonwealth Working Holidaymakers: individuals between the ages of 17-30 who can work in the UK for up to 2 years.
- Students from outside the EEA can work part-time whilst enrolled in courses.
- Undocumented workers including people who have entered the UK legally but are working without a legal right to do so and individuals who have entered the country illegally.

Statistics

This variety of categories, some requiring documentation some not, means that it is difficult to identify the total number of migrant workers in Northern Ireland with any degree of accuracy. Furthermore different departments have different means of classifying individuals, while some departments cannot separate migrants from nationals. This means that it is not possible to give an accurate figure for migrant workers currently in Northern Ireland.

However the available data does shed some light on the issue:

- The 2001 Census indicates that there were 10,355 people in Northern Ireland who were born in EU countries (excluding UK & RoI) and 20,204 people born in non-EU countries. This gives a maximum figure of 30,559 people who could be classified as migrant workers or dependents of migrant workers.
- The Labour Force Survey (Spring 2003) estimated that there were 9,000 non-UK and RoI nationals working in Northern Ireland.
- Data on work permits issued between 1998 and 2003 suggests that the maximum number of people working on work permits is 7082.
- The UK Immigration Service estimates that there are around 2000 undocumented workers in Northern Ireland.
- The UK National Statistics also indicate that there has been a net outflow of population from Northern Ireland every year since 1992. Over this time out-migration has exceeded immigration by 27,500 persons.

Due to the variety of overlapping sub-groups within the definition clarification on the numbers of migrant workers in Northern Ireland has proved difficult. However, it does indicate both the gaps in our knowledge and the scope for providing better data from the existing range of sources.

Demographics

Data from a variety of sources indicates that migrants are being employed in a wide range of sectors with the most frequently cited being food processing, agriculture, nursing and healthcare, education and hospitality and catering.

The diversity of employment sectors means that migrant workers are widely distributed across Northern Ireland. The significant Portuguese speaking community in Dungannon and Portadown has been noted in the media, but more recently food processing factories in Ballymena, Coleraine and elsewhere have also been turning to migrant workers. Most health care workers are employed in the Belfast area, but many health care trusts employ nurses from other countries. Farms and agriculture businesses in Newtownards, Portadown and in the border areas have employed migrant workers and such labour has also proved attractive to a range of hotels across Northern Ireland.

Migrants with a wide range of nationalities outside of the EEA applied for work permits. The most numerous are from the Philippines, India, Poland, Ukraine, USA and China as well as from Bulgaria, Romania, South Africa, Canada and Malaysia. Among the EEA countries Portuguese nationals are the largest visible group. It is possible the enlargement of the EU in 2004 will increase the numbers of migrants coming from the new accession states in Eastern Europe.

Data for people registering for National Insurance numbers suggest that men and women are migrating to Northern Ireland in equal proportion. Data from the ICR survey indicated that 57% of migrants were married and in 67% of these cases the partner was also in Northern Ireland and 38% of the survey sample had children living with them in Northern Ireland.

The ICR survey revealed that 48% of respondents had been in Northern Ireland for a year or less, 13% had lived here between one and two years, while 29% had lived in Northern Ireland for between 2 and 5 years and 10% had lived here for over 5 years.

Reasons for Migrating

The research identified a range of 'push' and 'pull' factors that either encouraged people to leave the country they were living in or attracted them to move to Northern Ireland. Limited opportunities for work was a prominent 'push' factor encouraging migration, while a range of positive attractions to Northern Ireland were cited. These included: a higher salary, opportunity for career development, a better standard of living, and the active recruitment process for specific occupations.

It is generally accepted that host countries benefit from inward migration of labour, in terms of having both skilled people and an increased labour capacity for jobs for which there is a limited local labour interest. The evidence from this research suggests that migrant labour is filling significant gaps in the labour force in Northern Ireland, both in terms of providing skilled workers, for example in the health system, and unskilled factory labour, for example in the food processing industry and in certain sectors of agriculture.

Furthermore the influx of migrants can have positive impact more generally. This can include the potential impact of migrants on a local economy in terms of consumption, housing and entertainment, and the increasing cultural diversity such immigration can bring to the wider society.

Issues, Problems and Responses

The research revealed that migrant workers experience a range of problems associated with working in Northern Ireland. Some of these are due to a lack of information, for example in relation to obtaining National Insurance numbers, poor working conditions, and their relationships with recruitment agencies. Other issues included a lack of recognition of existing qualifications, which affected types of job people could take and salary levels, or poor training provided by employers in Northern Ireland.

Most migrant workers lived in rented accommodation and a number of interviewees had experienced problems over housing, particularly if their home was supplied by their employer. In such cases leaving a job also meant finding a new home. Some people had also experienced harassment related to their housing situation, while others had experienced racism and harassment in the workplace and in the street.

Experiences of harassment were the main reasons for those migrants who were interviewed to have had contact with the police. Other statutory agencies that migrant workers had commonly engaged with were the Housing Executive, Social Security Agency, the health service and the education system. Each of the agencies had made some acknowledgement of

the existence of migrant workers as an emergent and distinctive category of client/customer and had begun to adapt systems in response, for example multi-lingual translation facilities.

The two major issues of concern for migrant workers in engaging with the various statutory bodies were in terms of information, often in regard to basic knowledge about access and rights to services, and the provision of interpreter services. All bodies had acknowledged this latter issue and some steps had been made to respond, but the need to be able to communicate with clients and customers in a growing number of languages was proving a challenge.

Many migrant workers had sought help and support from a diversity of community and voluntary organisations when dealing with their problems. A growing number of non-governmental organisations had acknowledged the presence of migrant workers in their locality or as a client group and were developing programmes and projects in response. Trade Unions and the Citizens Advice Bureaux were the most frequently contacted bodies, but projects such as STEP in Dungannon, Sure Start in Cookstown and Wah Hep in Craigavon represent the growing number of locally based groups engaging with migrant workers.

Conclusions

The research revealed that migrant workers are a growing category of employees in Northern Ireland and they are a necessary factor for many employment sectors due to a shortage of available local labour. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that migrant workers can have a positive impact on local communities and are an important factor in sustaining local business diversity.

However there is a lack of integrated and cross-departmental data on the number of people moving to Northern Ireland to live and work. This needs to be rectified so that service providers have a clearer indication of the needs they will be responding to.

There is also a need for better information for migrants arriving in Northern Ireland, which clearly identifies the full range of their rights and their responsibilities. There would be value in improving cross-sectoral partnerships within and between statutory agencies and NGOs to clarify issues of concern, identify emergent good practice and develop appropriate strategies for future action.