

# NORTH EAST **RACE EQUALITY** FORUM

## RESEARCH BRIEFING No.4

### **The North East: A warm and friendly welcome?**

**Introduction:** Whilst it is clear that the North East of England provides a warm and friendly welcome for many of us who come from other parts of the UK and indeed abroad, for some there is an often hidden side of open hostility. This difference may be to do with our sexual or religious preferences but is commonly down to ‘race’. This has been legitimised by the rise of UKIP and the intense attention paid by our politicians and news media to negative stories on migration. What is interesting is that all too often these negative stories have replaced positive immigration facts. For example, see the recent study by Dustmann and Frattini (2014)<sup>1</sup>, which revealed that those coming to our shores have made a much needed contribution to our national purse<sup>2</sup>.

The following summary provides a short account of some recent research on new Polish migrants in the UK that was jointly conducted by the Polish Academy of Sciences and Northumbria University in 2012/2013. Data was collected through a web-based questionnaire (qu.) that had 143 UK overall responses, with 125 in the north and 60 from the North East. This was followed by 46 semi-structured interviews (in.) with Poles in the North of England with 25 interviewees conducted in the North East. This current piece provides details of the 60 North East questionnaires and 25 interviews undertaken.

**Working lives of Polish newcomers to the North East:** To begin with it is important to provide a little context, 38 (63%) of our questionnaire respondents stated that their economic situation was good or correct. People in interviews echoed these views with several respondents noting that they had mortgages and intended to stay. Of importance was that 18 (30%) of our questionnaire respondents and one interviewee also stated that they had experienced various forms of work-based exploitation. Comments ranged from ‘forced labour, extorted by the employer...’ (qu.29) ‘...forcing overtime labour, ...cheating on the number of hours on payslip’ (qu.32) through ‘treating people with despise (sic), they fire them almost without the leave notice’ (qu.45) and ‘British employees are paid when we work on leave days but we Polish are not...’ (qu.67) to ‘failure to pay money’ (qu.28) and ‘poor working conditions’ (qu.65). It is also important to highlight that the often noted hard working and diligent Pole was seen by some employers as a hallmark of approval to expect more for less: ‘...in pubs and hotels I feel that employers expected me work hard and show more commitment than British people. I am seen as “hard working Polish labour” and have to carry heavy bags and given more work quotas. The formal equal rights for European citizens does not apply to many poles...’ (in.9). As we know this type of treatment is not new in the North East, although it has improved, but what is concerning is that of those exploited the vast majority felt that their economic situation was good (13 of 19). This may signify a trade-off between poor employment prospects for a better economic situation in the UK. So what currently prevails?

**Current integration into resident and Polish communities:** Importantly, under a half of our questionnaire respondents felt integrated into British society (27 of 60) and this was to some extent echoed in interviews with people noting isolation. However, there were even fewer questionnaire respondents who felt integrated into the Polish community (22 of 60) with Poles from Newcastle in particular noting ‘...probably not, there is little place for integration’ (qu.11) and ‘...rather not, I have not managed to get contact with migrant community’ (qu.120) as well as ‘...sure we have our close circle of friends and tend to remain so. I met with many disappointing situations with Poles, people do not know each other and want scratch your eyes’ (qu.40). This was readily expressed in the interviews with some emphasising the so-called ‘uncivilised’ nature of certain Poles who migrated from villages rather than towns and cities.

**Xenophobia and ignorance:** So how did the resident North East community treat our respondents? Even though there were some positive comments in both the questionnaire and in interviews, with people

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<sup>1</sup> Dustmann, C. and Frattini, T. (2014) “The Fiscal Effects of Immigration to the UK”, *The Economic Journal* 124: F593-F643.

<sup>2</sup> See our recent North East Race Equality Forum Information Briefing No. 5 for the facts on the immigrant contribution to our purse and the lack of support from our banks.

talking about 'having English friends' and feeling a part of the local community, the majority of the questionnaire respondents had experienced some form of xenophobia (37 of 60). Again, of these 37, the majority felt that their overall economic situation was good or correct (24 of 37). Significantly, the vast majority of those who had expressed an issue with their employment had also experienced xenophobia (15 of 18). Overall xenophobic incidents ranged from **open comments in public places**:

In Sunderland '...people have stuck their middle finger up at me...' (qu.62), '...kids in streets say "go home"...' (qu.63);

In Gateshead '...I was called a f@cking Polish freak...kids shouted for me to go home... I am often asked why do you immigrants have council houses when we have none!' (qu.21);

In Bishop Auckland a respondent noted '...abuse in the store and at school' (qu.35);

In Newcastle '...especially children...my son in school is insulted, beaten...' (qu.29), 'during my four years here I was confronted with verbal abuse' (qu.45), '...on the bus...complaining about too many of us and the bus driver once told me not to use the phone on the bus...' (qu.115).

To **vandalism and other forms of attack**:

'In Gateshead where I live I have had offensive graffiti on my wall' (qu.41);

'...Sunderland had my car scratched' (qu.47); '...broken window in my car...' (qu.38); '...several times my car destroyed' (qu.36), '...throwing eggs at our house...scratching our car, writing offensive words on the door' (qu.51);

In Newcastle '...Once when we were together on the bike we were stoned by children...' (qu.29).

Finally people were not even safe in the **regulated environment of work**:

'In my company I've heard offensive comments and often had racist comments from passengers on my bus...' (qu.57), '...in the last company where I worked there was a woman who talked about Poles being 'lazy bitches and stupid...' (qu.58), 'I think I have not got promotion despite my higher qualifications and professional experience compared to British colleagues' (qu.11), 'A colleague in my company said leave because other Englishman could not get a job...' (qu.19), '...colleagues form my company have said openly that members of their family do not have jobs because the Poles took their posts' (qu.36), '...in the company British make you feel that being a Pole means that you are worse than them' (qu.44), '...permanent blaming for taking British jobs, worse treatment by employees and management team' (qu.127)

The interviews also detailed xenophobia and there was a clear indication that this had become worse following the 2008 financial crisis:

In Newcastle 'The situation has worsened. Six years ago the English were more open towards us, there was not this campaign that we take their jobs and benefits. Now it is like Britain for Brits not for foreigners....' (in.1); 'The crisis as changed everything and old good time have vanished' (in.3), "The problem started in 2008 when this financial crash came. Indeed, I had eggs thrown at my windows, scratched car this type of stuff" (in.6);

In Washington 'The situation occurred when labour redundancy policy has been implemented in the factory. When crisis came. In the toilets racist graffiti appeared, some targeting Poles' (in.15)

## Conclusion

It can be argued that employers prior to 2008 found the 2004 Polish migration to be of significant value for hard-to-fill vacancies and for skilled workers, although, there is evidence that some employers used this migration as a means of 'wage control' and indeed exploited workers. Generally the 'diligent' Polish worker image was underpinned by government policy and much of public opinion. However, following the failure of the financial sector and the ensuing economic crisis, the atmosphere, tenor and manner of public opinion and debate changed. Government and 'pundits' now readily support and supply the news media with issues that question the role of migrants in our economy and indeed in our country. This is compounded by reductions in public spending which mean that it is more difficult for those who are having issues with xenophobia to seek advice and support from government and other agencies. A spiral of racism is emerging where near-racist policy objectives merge into a local reality where people feel more able to express xenophobic views, supported by some of the media and perhaps less likely to be challenged by the state?

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For further information about The North East **Race Equality** Forum, this series of **Research Briefings**, or to suggest other topics, contact [L.Wattis@tees.ac.uk](mailto:L.Wattis@tees.ac.uk)

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