

# **New Migrants and Belfast**

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1. There has been a significant increase in the numbers, backgrounds and diversity of migrants moving to work in Northern Ireland over recent years<sup>1</sup>. This trend came to prominence with the arrival of substantial numbers of Portuguese speaking migrants to work in the rural food processing industries, and Filipino and Indian nurses recruited to work in the health sector, from about 2001.
2. The trend has accelerated with the arrival of substantial numbers from Eastern Europe since 2004. Recent data indicates that 4% of migrants to the UK who registered under the Workers Registration Scheme came to Northern Ireland, whereas NI has 3% of the UK total population.
3. The new dynamism in migration has in part been generated by a growing local economy and a demand for labour, which cannot be met locally. It has been driven by employers and in particular by the private sector, but it has been able to exploit a desire by people in many countries to seek a better standard of living and develop their career opportunities.
4. Most interest in the new migration in Northern Ireland has focused on its impact on rural towns such as Ballymena, Cookstown, Dungannon and Portadown, where the new arrivals have had a significant impact on local demographics and employment patterns<sup>2</sup>. This submission, however, focuses purely on developments in Belfast. These have failed to attract the same levels of attention even though the city has attracted the largest number of migrants of any centre in Northern Ireland and numbers continue to grow. This paper is edited from research commissioned by Belfast City Council and presented to them in May 2007<sup>3</sup>.

## **The New Migrant Population of Belfast**

5. Belfast has long had a diverse range of minority ethnic and religious communities, the most widely recognised being the Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Traveller, Jewish and Sikh communities. The 2001 Census data indicates that Belfast contained:
  - 21% of the Northern Ireland population;
  - 30% of the minority ethnic population (4,310 persons);
  - 34% of the minority faith population (1,409 persons); and
  - 29% of the total population not born in the UK or Ireland (7,650 persons).

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<sup>1</sup> Bell, K., Jarman, N. & Lefebvre, T. (2004) *Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland*. Belfast, ICR.  
Jarman, N. (2006) *Changing Patterns and Future Planning: Migration and N. Ireland*. Belfast, ICR.

<sup>2</sup> Holder, D. (2007) *Issues Facing Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland: A Research Compendium of Animate and Partner Research*. Dungannon, Dungannon Borough Council & STEP.

<sup>3</sup> Jarman, N. and Byrne, J. (2007) *New Migrant Communities and Belfast: An Overview of the Demographic Context, Social Issues and Trends*. Belfast, Belfast City Council

6. However, the patterns of migration and minority demographics to Belfast have changed significantly since 2001. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency overview of long-term international migration estimates for Northern Ireland<sup>4</sup> is based on data from five principal sources: Worker Registration Scheme, work permits; registrations with a family doctor; applications for National Insurance Numbers and school census figures. These indicate that the *minimum* number of working migrants arriving in Belfast between April 2004 and March 2006 was 4,224 people.
7. However, there are several categories of migrants who are captured by these figures. They include migrants from other EU member states; unregistered A8 migrants; self-employed A8 migrants; dependents; and undocumented migrants. A 'guesstimate' of these categories, based on models used for other UK research, suggests that a figure of 7,506 new migrants to Belfast between April 2004 and March 2006 is not unreasonable.
8. While this figure may not appear to be particularly substantial in UK terms, it does represent a doubling of the total migrant population of the city in two years compared with the 2001 Census data and anecdotal evidence suggests that inward migration is continuing to grow.

### Demographics

9. The available data indicates that the largest numbers of new migrants to Belfast come from Poland, followed by Slovaks, Filipinos, Indians, Czechs, Lithuanians and Chinese. There are also substantial numbers of people from other western European countries living in the city.
10. There is some variation of nationalities by employment sector, with health sector predominantly employing Filipinos, Indians and Malays, while east Europeans are more evident in the service sector and construction industry.
11. The data indicates that 61% of new migrants to Belfast are male and 39% are female. There is a higher percentage of male migrants among eastern Europeans.
12. The majority of migrants fall within the 18-34 age range, with relatively few migrants over the age of forty-five. The data indicates that some 16% of new migrants are children under the age of sixteen.

### Skills and Education

13. It is difficult to obtain information about the education, skill or language abilities of the new migrant population from official data. Nevertheless some small indications can be gathered from the previous research on migrants. An ICR study from 2003<sup>5</sup> indicated that all Belfast respondents had a university education.

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<sup>4</sup> Beatty, R. Fegan, G. and Marshall, D. (2006) *Long-Term International Migration Estimates for Northern Ireland (2004-5): Sources and Methodology*. Belfast, NISRA.

While 85% said their educational qualifications were recognised in Northern Ireland, 15% said they were not recognised here.

14. A 2005 survey of health workers<sup>6</sup> found that migrant staff were well educated and qualified, and had a good command of English. Although 66% of migrants whose qualifications were gained outside the UK said that their qualifications were recognised here, 27% said that they had to retrain before they could work here.
15. Contacts in the education sector suggest there has been an increase in the number of migrants with high levels of education and experience of working in professional occupations arriving in Belfast. It is believed that the motivation for some migrants was not primarily economic, but educational, and once they have improved their English they would return home to further their career.
16. Staff at BIFHE (now Belfast Metropolitan College) noted a dramatic increase in the numbers of individuals attending courses in 'English as a Second Language', from 350 people in 2002-2003, to 2,500 in 2005-2006. However, the college has seen its budget for these programmes significantly reduced, which will have implications for the process of integration of new migrants.

### Plans and Expectations

17. Research suggests that there are three broad categories of migrant workers residing in Belfast, and although this is not a fixed or bounded categorization, it may help in identifying the needs and interests of the new migrants.
  - **Short-term migrants:** intend to work in Belfast for up to two years. They have little interest in integrating and see their presence here as transitory.
  - **Medium-term migrants:** plan to work here for an undetermined period, but will return home to work. They are likely to embrace local culture and learn English. This will assist integration and be a benefit when they return home.
  - **Long-term migrants:** move to Belfast with their family, enrol their children in school, have a goal of owning their own home and wish to integrate into society. This group's needs and interests are very different from the other two and may form the core of more formalised new minority communities.
18. However, these categories are not fixed and it has been suggested that the key period for making a decision about returning home or building a life in the new country or location is two years, as after two years migrants have become more established and it becomes more difficult to uproot and return home.

### New Communities?

19. The new migrants are different from previous cycles of immigration insofar as the new people have less historic links with the UK and few established networks. It

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<sup>5</sup> Bell, K., Jarman, N. and Lefebvre, T. (2004) *Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland*. Belfast, ICR.

<sup>6</sup> Betts, J. and Hamilton, J. (2006) *An Investigation into the Nature, Extent and Effects of Racist Behaviours Experienced by Northern Ireland's Ethnic Minority Healthcare Staff*. Belfast, ICR.

is therefore difficult to consider them as ‘communities’ as such yet, but also important to monitor how they do develop over the next few years.

20. Probably the only new community to be established in Northern Ireland, and specifically Belfast, is the Polish community. The exact number of Poles in Northern Ireland is uncertain, but it has been claimed that there are 9,000 Poles in Belfast. Indications of the growing Polish population are the number support groups, social networks, and shops and bars selling Polish products.
21. Data indicates a growing numbers of Czech, Latvian, Lithuanian and Slovakian people in the city, but these do not appear to have established any community associations and networks as the Polish community has done. Some agencies, including trade unions, have tried to organise meeting with these smaller communities, but with little interest as yet.

### **Employment Perspectives**

22. There are a growing numbers of migrants employed in four main employment sectors in Belfast: construction, health, hospitality and IT. Of the four, construction and IT have been the last to embrace the potential for employing migrant workers, but each sector contains a growing number of new migrants within its workforce.
23. **Construction:** it is estimated that up to 5% of the construction workforce across NI is a recent migrant. The regeneration of Belfast is placing demands and opportunities on the construction industry, which it has been claimed will demand 10,000 new workers over the next few years.
24. **Health:** there are estimated to be between 1,500 and 2,000 new migrant staff working in the public and private health sector across NI, primarily as nurses, but also as other health professionals and as ancillary staff.
25. **Hospitality:** the hotel, café, restaurant and associated business sectors appear to be increasingly reliant on migrants for staff. The relative economic boom in Belfast has helped generate a substantial growth in this sector.
26. **IT:** increasingly the growing IT sector in Belfast and NI also appears to becoming reliant upon young, well-educated and high earning migrant staff from a diverse range of national backgrounds.
27. A number of migrants also arrive in Belfast without pre-arranged employment or residence. In some cases they rely on family, friends and pre-existing social networks, but often they are self-dependent and rely on recruitment agencies and advertisements for employment.

28. Most **recruitment agencies** are open to having migrants on their books, while growing numbers of employers recognise that employing foreign nationals is neither unusual nor a risk, but rather has become a routine feature of working life.
29. There is still some considerable **exploitation** of migrant workers in some sectors. Many support agencies recount regular complaints of low pay, and problems over overtime, holidays and sick pay being recounted. But at the same time, there is evidence that migrant workers are gaining in confidence in the work place and are establishing themselves in the local economy.
30. There does appear to be some contrasts in education and abilities of new migrants registering to seek work: some people are over qualified for the work available, while others do not have the level of English required by employers.
31. Organisations as diverse as Business in the Community, the Trade Unions and the Equality Commission have become proactive in fighting for the rights of migrant workers and educating employers on the needs of this specific client group.
32. There was a strong perception among the business community that the majority of migrant workers were **working legally** and were in possession of the appropriate documentation. The employers also noted that recent legislation (Gangmasters Licensing Act 2004) made it illegal for employers to source labour from recruitment agencies who operated without a gangmasters licence, but it is unclear how effective this legislation has been so far.
33. There are undoubtedly some migrants in Belfast with an **irregular or undocumented status**, but there has been little research on this issue. The greatest concern for such people however, is their vulnerability to exploitation, the denial of their basic human rights and the potential for them to fall through any safety net. These areas are the dark underbelly of the new migration and require further investigation and understanding.
34. The pace of change of recent developments means that it is increasingly difficult and less useful to try to generalise about employment practices and issues of concern given the diverse range of skills, education levels and employment sectors that draw upon migrant staff and labour. The experiences, needs and concerns of a highly skilled worker on a permanent basis within the IT sector are increasingly different from those of someone with limited English and registered for casual work with a recruitment agency. The situation is fluid and varied, patterns are changing rapidly and will continue to change over the next few years.

### Review

35. The evidence of the recent patterns of migration to Belfast indicates that they are distinctive and different from other parts of Northern Ireland. The migration to many parts of Northern Ireland has largely been in response to the needs of the food processing, agriculture and rural industries whereas in Belfast it has been a more diverse series of events, which has involved responding to the needs of

- construction, health, the service sector and high tech industries. But it is also driven by the opportunity offered to the people who are moving: to earn money, to improve their language skills and develop career opportunities.
36. The term 'migrant worker' increasingly covers a diverse range of nationalities, ethnicities, skills, employment sectors and personal experiences and as such it can no longer be considered as a homogenous group. Thus there must be some caution exercised when generalising about the experiences and needs of 'migrant workers' throughout Northern Ireland.
  37. The new migrant population is increasingly internally diverse as partners, family members and children move as well; but also as people become established and children are born here. This means that the focus will in future be less on the work environment and more on social need and service provision in relation to education, health and housing.
  38. Although migrants are not a new feature of the social dynamic of Belfast, the current pattern of migration is distinctive in terms of its speed, the numbers of people and the countries they are coming from. This poses challenges in relation to processes of integration, community cohesion, racism and xenophobia. It also poses challenges in relation to meeting the needs and providing appropriate services to the different members of the new communities.
  39. There are also concerns within some communities and some statutory agencies about the impact that the continuing rise in migrants will have on housing demand and prices in some working class areas.
  40. There is an expectation that Belfast will continue to need and attract significant numbers of migrants in the future, but there is also a growing acknowledgement that this is not inevitable and the city will need to develop a strategy to attract and welcome the migrants it is likely to need to continue its regeneration.
  41. However, it is also important for employers within the city to acknowledge the needs of the indigenous population and to ensure that there is an adequate investment in training and education for young people, instead of simply relying on important already skilled labour.
  42. Although the new diversity has been widely welcomed as an indicator of the new peaceful Northern Ireland, there has also been a significant increase in racism and xenophobia over the past decade, while bigotry and prejudice remain prominent in many communities.
  43. The new migration has largely been generated by the private sector and there is a need for the statutory sector and service providers to be more engaged and aware of the range of implications and issues to ensure that there is not a dark downside to the new demographic context of Northern Ireland.