

# Immigration and social cohesion in the UK

Findings  
Informing change

July 2008

This research draws on original material gathered from six UK sites with different experiences of migration and post-industrial transformations, and comprising different populations of long-term residents and new immigrants. Between them, they illustrate various contexts of social cohesion in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

## Key points

- Most people felt that social cohesion was about negotiating the right balance in expressing difference and unity in local areas, rather than expecting complete consensus on values and priorities.
- Some majority ethnic long-term residents experienced government concerns with immigration as prioritising the interests of private business, while neglecting their specific needs.
- The arrival of new immigrants could highlight the resilience of some communities, or the profound disconnections between people, groups and institutions in others.
- Many long-term residents and new arrivals valued the UK for being multi-ethnic and multicultural.
- Communities which thought of a locality as belonging to them in particular were more likely to blame new arrivals for problems that often already existed.
- Communities which thought of a locality as belonging to everyone tended to be more open to new arrivals.
- When the arrival of new immigrants brought about improvements in infrastructure support and opportunities for new arrivals and long-term residents, these shared circumstances were welcomed and valued by all.
- The researchers conclude that the limited opportunities and multiple deprivations of the long-term settled population in parts of UK towns and cities undermine social cohesion. To ensure cohesion, the impact of social and economic changes needs to be addressed as well as how people relate to each other.

## The research

By researchers from the Institute for the Study of European Transformations, London Metropolitan University.

## Background

The disputed consequences of recent immigration for everyday life in the UK include concerns over social cohesion. While many point to migrants' economic contribution, others raise concerns about pressures on welfare, labour and housing markets, and the cohesiveness of everyday life.

The Government underestimated recent immigration, allowing media speculation about numbers and consequences. Following European Union enlargement in 2004, inflows into the UK outstripped the capacity to monitor such movements and placed considerable demands on the scope for cohesive integration. New immigration has contributed to the pressures on social cohesion arising from the economic and social transformations of the twenty-first century, which have created new economic and social opportunities, but also communities of worklessness and structural deprivation.

This research, based on findings from interviews and observations in six sites, tried to contextualise migration as part of these changes, which are reshaping everyday life and social cohesion in the UK.

### Family, work and housing

The dynamics of work and family life have changed significantly in the last decade. Families are smaller, more people live alone, and work commands more of people's time, impacting on their associations within and beyond work. Many interviewees – both new arrivals and settled residents – felt that families are increasingly under pressure from the demands of work and consumerism, which could also undermine parental authority. Some recent arrivals felt that family values were particularly under pressure in the UK.

People were generally committed to their families, and new arrivals with families, as well as the settled population, devoted much of their non-working time to them. This, combined with the demands of work, reduced the time available for wider social activities and relationships.

“I'll take work home sometimes ... and then I've got the kids and we're doing things with them ... and making sure they do their homework, then I'm doing my Masters as well ... my husband he goes to work all day and we're both tired at the end of the day and there's tea to get on the table.” (Long-term settled minority ethnic woman, Leicester)

Many long-term settled residents in parts of UK towns and cities have experienced diminished social lives

because of worklessness. The impact of structural unemployment, particularly in areas with declining single industries, can devastate community well-being and create poor conditions for responding to new labour-market requirements. Limitations placed on asylum seekers generate another form of worklessness – they are legally unable to work, but are nonetheless identified as scroungers. The combined impact of such worklessness created employment opportunities for arrivals from the 2004 accession countries (A8), who were able to respond to UK labour-market demands.

Many new arrivals weighed their working life in the UK against the limited economic opportunities they left behind. Some were thus prepared to tolerate poor pay and conditions, but the longer they remained the more informed they became about their rights as workers. Some new arrivals, especially from A8 countries, planned to get jobs better suited to their skills when they became more proficient English speakers. Others felt exploited by their status as casual, migrant workers.

“People have to phone every day and ask if there is work. So still they do not know they are working at seven or even six o'clock ... And sometimes they are working for 15 hours ...” (New arrival, minority ethnic man, Peterborough)

Many long-term residents and new arrivals valued the younger generation growing up with cultural diversity. Others felt that their prospects were reduced because of recent immigration, particularly in terms of housing. Many of the settled population in poor housing felt marginalised and unsupported. This sense of unfairness was exacerbated when new arrivals, particularly asylum seekers, were seen as having privileged claims to housing. These perceptions of limited entitlements to housing and equity being undermined by immigration created hostility to new arrivals rather than criticism of housing provision.

Many issues around overcrowding and understanding local conventions and expectations could be successfully mediated if social agencies, including local authorities, simultaneously supported new arrivals and settled residents in the private and social housing sectors.

“But what's happened there is a real transformation. Because you did have a community that was up in arms because that was a poor community and they saw people ... seeking asylum coming in and being given these furnished houses ... And what has happened now [after agency support] is that that very community who was up in arms against the asylum seekers is now ... they are now working together and community integration up there is fantastic.” (Key informant, Glasgow)

## Education, deprivation and social cohesion

The relationship between education, deprivation and social cohesion was complex. Factors of class, ethnicity, gender and age affected relations between local residents and the meaning attached to educational achievement. Where education was not valued, the arrival of migrant groups with educational aspirations could disrupt social cohesion in schools and the wider community.

**“We worked really hard to come to England, back in India you’ve got to pay for an education, here you get a free education, you’ve got to make the most of it. And it was the complete opposite at my school. It was uncool to do your homework.”**  
(Long-term settled minority ethnic woman, Downham)

Not all schools could meet newly arriving pupils’ language needs. Where resources were adequate, schools enhanced new arrivals’ ability to participate in the community, and new arrivals could enhance the school’s educational performance. When challenges and tensions arose, schools and other local organisations could play a key role in diffusing the situation.

In deprived areas particularly, the arrival of new groups provided potential challenges and opportunities to improve social relations between local groups. When their arrival was followed by enhanced support for local long-term residents, relations improved and regeneration programmes were experienced as countering long-seated inequalities. If not, the arrival of new groups in deprived areas could exacerbate social tensions, as long-term residents felt that the support available to them would be undermined by the newcomers.

Regeneration programmes were more effective when they incorporated all groups experiencing deprivation, whether long-term settled or new arrivals. If only concentrated areas of deprivation were targeted, the surrounding areas could feel marginalised and disadvantaged, and regeneration could add to rather than diffuse social tensions. Equally, costly private-public joint ventures such as City Academies, which often guarantee high achievement rates by selecting the most advantaged children, could reproduce the structural inequalities and dynamics underpinning local social antagonisms. These were often displaced on to academically less achieving neighbouring schools.

## Places and politics of belonging

When local communities identified as ‘people from here’ (i.e. that the locality belonged to them in particular), immigration tended to be held responsible for problems which often had a long history. This happened less in communities where migration and cultural diversity were acknowledged as part of everyday life, and people

expected their locality to include people ‘from here’ and ‘from elsewhere’.

**“It’s Irish and Caribbean youngsters, unlike anywhere else they plot together here in Stonebridge. They hang around together ... because it’s ... back ages and ages ago when everyone come over some Irish people would buy up and then let Caribbeans stay. And then some Caribbeans would buy up and let Irish stay. So it’s a sort of mutual respect thing ... No dogs, No blacks, No Irish.”** (Long-term settled young person, minority ethnic, Irish, Kilburn)

Sharing histories of settlement as well as experiences of discrimination often results in people being able to more successfully mediate relations between new arrivals and settled residents. When agencies assisted in mediating between new arrivals and long-term settled people, these relations could also be improved. However, when relations were left unattended, tensions were more likely to emerge, particularly where local communities identified themselves as predominantly settled and ‘from here’. These tensions could arise in neighbour relations and from gaps in resources in housing, work, education and youth and leisure provision.

**“Our cohesion problems in the town, since the riots we had two-three years ago, have been more around what do you put in this dustbin, and ... we found that the indigenous population do not like the different lifestyles ... We do home visits to new arrivals to try and say look, this is what you put in the bin, please put some curtains up, please cut the grass, please don’t drive that car without a licence.”** (Key informant, Peterborough)

**“X [Protestant community leader] takes a group of Polish people in his area ... to the Catholic church, because he thought the place that they lived in was unsafe for them to be seen to go to the wrong church ... what he did was he picked them up and took them ... that’s what I’m saying about negotiating things. He was taking them wherever they wanted to go, it was their own business, because they become part of us through him. So X took the Polish family from the Protestant community to the Catholic church ... and that basically puts a marker down for the Protestant community saying, ‘These people are friends of mine’.”** (Key informant, Dungannon)

Across all sites, new arrivals and long-term residents’ feelings of belonging to Britain were complex:

- Majority ethnic interviewees in England often found it difficult to reflect on their feelings of belonging to Britain, because they had not previously considered it.

- Majority ethnic interviewees in Scotland and Northern Ireland often felt that they belonged more to their respective jurisdictions than to Britain.
- Most Northern Irish respondents also seemed to want to move on from previous patterns of divisive ethno-national belonging.
- Minority ethnic long-term residents and new arrivals were usually more explicit than other groups about their positive reasons for and feelings of belonging in Britain.

This shared complexity was dealt with differently, marked by different migration histories, which also influenced local notions of social cohesion. In communities which imagined themselves as settled, new arrivals were expected to fit into fixed ideas of Britishness, which denied its complex and contested nature. In these areas, social cohesion was considered to be the problem and task of newcomers. When local identities were about being 'from here' and 'from elsewhere', this complexity was generally more openly accepted by long-term settled residents; and social cohesion was more often seen as a shared project with new arrivals.

## Conclusion

The researchers conclude that to ensure cohesion, the impact of social and economic changes needs to be addressed as well as how people relate to each other. The limited opportunities and multiple deprivations of the long-term settled population in parts of UK towns and cities undermine social cohesion. These fundamental issues of deprivation, disadvantage and discrimination impact on both majority ethnic and minority ethnic settled residents. This research suggests that a restructuring of the housing debate away from arguments about need and entitlement to a focus on the provision of adequate housing for all would be beneficial for social cohesion. There are opportunities across a number of policy areas to integrate addressing disadvantages and ensuring cohesion.

The researchers conclude that a key factor influencing whether new immigrants are accepted is the dominant

story in each locality about who belongs there. Their findings go against the grain of the idea that we need a fixed notion of Britishness and British values. Rather, 'cohesion' is about negotiating the right balance between separateness and commonality. What most people welcome is the opportunity to meet residents in their area at social occasions or cultural events, and to be able to exercise the choice of, selectively, getting to know people better. In addressing relations between people it is necessary to enable and support both expressions of *difference* and of *unity*. Both are opportunities for people to learn about each other and relate to each other.

## About the project

The study was by Mary Hickman, Helen Crowley and Nick Mai from the Institute for the Study of European Transformations, London Metropolitan University. Six UK sites were chosen for their different compositions of long-term residents and new migrants, and their potential to illustrate various social cohesion contexts. They were: Downham (London), Dungannon (Northern Ireland), Glasgow, Kilburn (London), Leicester and Peterborough. In each case the researchers worked closely with local organisations. In Dungannon, a research partner, the Institute for Conflict Research, conducted the research on the team's behalf. Umut Erel, now at the Open University, undertook the research in Peterborough when she was a member of the Working Lives Research Institute at London Metropolitan University.

The methodology for each site was: 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with key respondents; 40 biographical interviews with residents (except in Glasgow, where 20 diaries substituted for 20 interviews); and observation of patterns of everyday life. The two core interviewee categories were long-term settled and new arrivals. The study focused equally on both, because to understand the relationship between social cohesion and new immigration, research on arrivals needs to be integrated with understanding of the long-term settled population.

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## Further information

The full report, **Immigration and Social Cohesion in the UK: The rhythms and realities of everyday life** by Mary Hickman, Helen Crowley and Nick Mai, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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