Migration: challenging the debate and developing a positive agenda around migration in the Yorkshire region

Briefing note from the Migration Roundtable event, Leeds, March 2015.

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In this briefing document, we summarise the discussion and outcomes from a Roundtable event held in Leeds in March 2015 to explore the issues of migration and to look at the opportunities that migration creates for the region. The event involved councillors, business leaders, union representatives, migrant group organisations, migrants and migration researchers at the University of Leeds. After focusing on 6 main areas of current debate, the Roundtable welcomed the possibility of developing a longer-term forum for sustaining debate around migration. This could be a regular regional forum for sharing evidence, for expanding the voices talking and debating migration and for reframing the discourse around migration. The goal of the forum would be to help the city and region to develop a progressive agenda around migration, to meet the needs of all stakeholders.

Migration is an important issue facing the Yorkshire region, one which was prominent in pre-election debates, and also in the post-election context. The discourses around migration are too often negative and oppressive. Agendas around migration are often formed on the basis of selective evidence, or ignorance. Migration tends to be characterised as a ‘problem’ to be tackled through an increasingly restrictive welfare system and tighter immigration controls. There is a need to shift attention towards an understanding of the experiences of migrants in the region, both in the workplace and community. There is also a need to understand the role that migrants do, and can, play within the region. Furthermore there is a need to develop
responses at public policy, workplace and community levels.

On 6th March 2015, a Roundtable event was organised by a team of interdisciplinary researchers at the University of Leeds, with interests and experience researching a range of aspects of migration. The Roundtable sought to explore the issues of migration, and to look at the opportunities that migration creates for the Yorkshire region. The Roundtable was set up to provide an open space to discuss, support and inform the debate in the region around migration. The event brought together voices of migrants together with leading figures in the region including Councillors, business leaders and union representatives, with over 20 participants attending.

The event heard directly from those involved in migration in Yorkshire, and explored the role of migrants in the region, and perceptions towards migration. Drawing on evidence from a briefing document produced by the University of Leeds in March 2015 (‘From Exploitation as a Problem to Migration as An Opportunity’, University of Leeds) the Roundtable looked immigration status and the effects of change in status; the work experiences of migrants; welfare access; and organising and community engagement. This was followed by an open discussion about how to take debate forward, and to discuss the question of what contribution can local and regional stakeholders make to help ensure that migration benefits the Leeds and Yorkshire region?

In this briefing we provide a summary of the findings from the Roundtable event. The event was conducted under Chatham House rules, so no individual names or organisations are attributed to the issues raised. We look at 6 areas in particular:

- the current (often negative agenda) around migration, and how to challenge this
- the importance of a locally informed debate
- the experiences of migrants in work and the needs of migrants in this sphere
- welfare
- the need for more robust data and evidence, and a recognition of the value of both quantitative and qualitative research to understand migration
- developing a forum to meet the local and regional agenda around migration.
1. Changing the current discourse on migration.

A prominent theme throughout the roundtable was the perception that immigration was currently discussed in a negative way. An increasingly hostile environment towards migrants had been perpetuated during the election campaign. The underlying assumptions are that migration is a problem, and that it needs to be reduced. This, according to the dominant discourse, is to be achieved by penalties, withholding of benefits and further restrictions on migrants, including penalising access to the labour market; and involving the private housing sectors as target sphere of immigration controls.

However, there was consensus the ‘real’ impact of migration offers a different script behind the headlines. The weight of evidence, including that in the University of Leeds briefing, shows that migration benefits the national AND regional economy despite the public hostility. Furthermore, despite the rhetoric, migration in the UK is not out of line with that experienced in other open economies.

2. Migration at a local level

Throughout the Roundtable, the importance of focusing the debate at a local and regional level was emphasised. Unfortunately, debate at the national, political, level was unlikely to be altered, yet at the local level, there was great scope to reframe the debate, and to develop progressive agendas around migration to meet the needs of the city of Leeds and Yorkshire region.

It was felt that it was at the city and local level, where we have the scope to create opportunities, and where policy intervention, through economic planning and the promotion of mobility can be achieved. Furthermore, with enforcement of the punitive, national migration agenda being externalised to the local and regional level through the migration bill, this did also create local opportunities for action.
3. The role of migrants in the workplace

Prominent regional employers, and union representatives provided a persuasive commentary on the key role played by migrants in work. Too often, public attention focused just on immigration, yet labour markets, and the opportunities for workers were not local. Furthermore, all too often, the employment of workers from outside the UK, particularly in organisations like the NHS, was perceived as a ‘failure’. Yet the movement of labour should not be characterised as a failure, rather it is an inevitable, and desirable part of a global economy. Migrants have, do, and will continue to play an important role in the region, in both public services and the private sector.

Yet, the evidence in the briefing document circulated in the ‘From Exploitation as a Problem to Migration as An Opportunity’ document, (University of Leeds, 2015) provided detail of the exploitation faced in work by many migrants. Furthermore, it documented the relatively poor terms and conditions of work they experience. Participants pointed to growing casualisation at work, and the rise of zero-hours contracts. Beyond this, it was highlighted that there are multiple dimensions of exploitation, and that changes in status, and different categories of migrants can mean that vulnerability remains blurred. Unions and other groups can play a role here, by providing guidance, support and organisation. However, the complexity of work and benefit rules meant that this was difficult, and both migrants and their advocates need empowerment in the face of complexity.

4. Welfare

A key theme in the roundtable was the welfare system, and the challenges and difficulties that this presented to migrants, Migration welfare rules were very complex, even within the EU, making the process challenging and the systems difficult to navigate. An increasingly hostile and restrictive environment made it difficult for migrants to access benefits and to avail themselves of services, such as healthcare.

We need to look at the issue through two lenses – emigration and immigration. Public discourse invariably focuses on the latter (Large regional employer, Roundtable)
housing and schooling. In turn, the sanctions and systems are increasing the likelihood of slavery and exploitation, with statutory services unable to support those with ‘Limited leave to remain’ status.

5. The need for more data and evidence

There was a clear appetite in the Roundtable for detailed, robust regional and local evidence on migration, some of which is already provided by Migration Yorkshire. This information would provide local and regional stakeholders with evidence to allow them to develop policies and initiatives around migration. This evidence would include quantitative skills audits of employers’ needs, the current roles played by migrants, and would help to highlight the potential role that migrants could play in contributing to the future success of the region.

The value of quantitative data was recognised by the panel, and there was also a strong feeling that qualitative evidence, from interviews and case studies could play a valuable role in helping develop a nuanced understanding of the needs of migrants and their actual and potential role in the local and regional economy. This evidence would also be important to developing further collaboration between stakeholders and the university, and developing a longer-term sustainable migration forum/network.

The approach adopted by ‘Leeds Poverty Truth’ was seen as something that worked well and it was felt strongly that we can tap into the methodology and experience of that, and seek to reproduce the model of testimonials to understand migration and to ‘make visible what is currently silent’. This would allow people with direct experience of migration and exploitation to talk before, and connect to, power holders at the local level.

We need to work out what is happening at the local level and get the message about the role of migrants in the region (Migrant representative organisation, Roundtable)
6. A new forum to meet the regional and local agenda around migration

Participants welcomed the possibility of developing a longer-term forum for sustaining debate around migration, to build on the results of this first Roundtable. This could be a regular forum for sharing evidence, for expanding the voices talking and debating migration and for reframing the discourse even more, so that the city and region can develop a progressive agenda around migration. This network could also become a point of contact with local administrators and civic actors, engaging in local and regional migration-related forum and events.

Challenging and reframing the debate: charting a way forward.

The following were identified as key challenges and areas to work towards:

- Developing more robust evidence base at a local and regional level

This evidence can be used as a way of ‘myth busting’ around migration, of getting the message out a local level about the positive role of migrants, and to give stakeholders the information they need to build a Leeds/Yorkshire based view of the role of migrants in the economy. A different political narrative around migration, needs to be built at the local level, if this is to be achieved.

- Engaging local and regional stakeholders.

There was felt to be a pressing need to develop concrete strategies to engage unions, employers, business, migrants, welfare, and get them working together on issues around migration. It was felt to be important that more stakeholders were involved in planning. Engaging private sector employers was felt to be a particular challenge.
Developing a more co-ordinated system and approach to ensure support for migrants at the local and regional level.

It was felt that with more detailed and systematic evidence on the role of migrants in the regional economy, and a better understanding of their experiences and needs, stakeholders could develop a dialogue and co-ordinated approach to supporting migrants at the local and regional level. In turn, this might help the city and region to develop a progressive agenda around migration, to meet the needs of all stakeholders.

References


About this briefing: A team of University of Leeds scholars who specialise in migration and labour prepared this briefing to encourage dialogue between key stakeholders to discuss the issue: Gabriella Alberti, Zinovijus Ciupijus, Chris Forde, Robert MacKenzie (Centre for Employment Relations Innovation and Change-CERIC), Hannah Lewis, Louise Waite (School of Geography) and Rosa Mas Giralt (Centre for International Research on Care, Labour and Equalities-CIRCLE).

This Roundtable event was organised by University of Leeds Care-Connect as part of a series of influencing events to discuss policy options in the run up to the General Election 2015. Care-Connect is one of University of Leeds’ ground breaking sector innovation hubs which aims to use research to inform policy and practice, with the ultimate objective of supporting the creation and sustainability of caring, connected communities: www.care-connect.leeds.ac.uk

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