

Migrant workers in the East of England: benefits and challenges

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to speak to you all today. You will have seen in your packs what I hope to cover today so let's start with a definition.

What is a migrant worker?

Very simply there are two elements – 'migrant' suggests movement, usually from one country to another, and I think we all know what 'worker' means!

The UN Convention on the Rights of Migrants defines a migrant worker as a *"person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national."* There is a clarification in the convention that the term 'migrant' should be understood as covering all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned. So this definition indicates that migrant does not refer to refugees, displaced or others forced or compelled to leave their homes.

For official data purposes in the UK, there are different definitions used. As examples:

The International Passenger Survey (IPS) defines a migrant as 'a person who has resided abroad for a year or more, and who states on arrival the intention to stay in the UK for a year or more'.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) provides a definition of: "a foreign worker is someone who works but has foreign citizenship and a foreign-born worker is anyone born outside of the UK, including British citizens".

I spent a long-time working in Africa, and so when I returned to the UK I would have been classified as a migrant worker in the International Passenger Survey, but not in the Labour Force Survey. My wife on the other hand, who is a Dutch national born in Ethiopia, would have been a migrant worker in both surveys.

So let's be clear about what we mean. Migrants are people who make choices about when to leave and where to go. Migrant workers then are people who choose to leave their home country and seek work. In the East of England many recent migrant workers have come from the enlarged EU and as such we should not forget that they are simply taking up their right as EU citizens to live and work in another member state.

We could ask ourselves the question, for how long is someone a migrant worker. In the EEDA research of 2005 the definition was for people who have arrived in the last five years. We should try to avoid branding people with a permanent label though, because in doing so we encourage stereotypes. If someone came in May 2004 from Poland and has since found a job that is better than the one they did at first; bought a house; and possibly got married are they still a migrant worker? What about if they moved to Thetford from Portugal eight or ten years ago? When are they simply someone who is foreign born but part of our community?

How many migrant workers are there in the region?

I am asked this question at least once a week and the answer is always the same. I don't know.

The official data that is published does not consider those who come for a few months. To be included in official population statistics a migrant worker needs to be resident here for at least 12 months. Data sources include the Workers Registration Scheme and Applications for National Insurance Numbers. Note that these are both measuring signing on and not signing off. Even if these data were completely accurate they do not account for those who leave or who cease to use their national insurance number.

Let me give you some idea of what we are talking about though. The Accession Monitoring reports that are published each quarter only cover the A8 countries. The data in them are based on management information and are not national statistics.

The latest report (to December 2007) shows the Anglia region having had the largest number of people registering for the Workers Registration Scheme with 112,785 or 15% of the total. The Anglia region is a postal one and does not correspond to the East of England – and doesn't include Bedfordshire at all. However my Freedom of Information request showed figures for the East of England being 85,455 workers registering under this scheme between May 2004 and December 2007, or 11% of the total. Of these 4,850 (almost 6% of those in this region) registered to work in Bedfordshire, plus a further 8,225 in Luton alone.

These figures are based on the postcode of the place of employment at the time of registration and so someone who lives in South Bedfordshire but works in Luton, for example, will not be included in these figures. Similarly, if someone first worked in London and then moved to Bedfordshire, they will also not be included.

The other key data set in these reports is National Insurance Numbers, which are published by Government Office region and are based on the residential postcode of the applicant. There will be similar issues around people living in one place and working in another, so that the South Beds resident working in Luton would be included in the South Bedfordshire NINO figures. The cumulative number of applications for this region from May 2004 until December 2007 was 66,087, the fifth largest figure after London, the South East, Scotland and the North West. There is an obvious discrepancy between these two sets of figures.

These figures are only of A8 nationals and, while I don't have a breakdown of the National Insurance number figures for Bedfordshire, Jobcentre management information shows that within the top ten nationalities registering in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire, Indian, Pakistani, Ghanaian and, to a lesser extent Nigerian nationals appear quite regularly.

I cannot say how many migrant workers there are in the region or in Bedfordshire. Suffice it to say that the Office of National Statistics is implementing a number of measures in an effort to improve the data available, but at the local level you should do everything you can to share administrative data about school or GP registrations,

electoral roll registration etc. so that you have a good idea about what is happening in your own area. Ultimately we hope that the ONS will also be able to use such data to inform national statistics.

So what are the key issues?

The main issues facing migrant workers across the region were identified in the 2005 research 'Migrant Workers in the East of England'. These were:

- Access to information, which is very much about language
- Access to services, which is more about culture and different ways of doing things
- Housing – particularly around tied housing but also generally in terms of overcrowding etc
- Skills - related to language skills / re-qualifications

There was also a recommendation for further research, though our feeling here is that it is better to find out by testing or piloting responses than to invest lots more money in research and wait for that to suggest what should be done next. That said, there is always a need for evidence to back up policy and action.

Although I am not going to go into these issues in any detail now, it is worth noting that broadly other research within the region and across the UK has had very similar findings.

And what are we doing?

Well since June 2006 there has been a regional migrant worker steering group, chaired by Sheila Childerhouse, an EEDA board member. This has brought together a number of regional representatives to address the issues I have just outlined. It has links to multi-agency fora to ensure a bottom-up approach, with issues from the front-line being brought to the attention of the more strategic players at regional level. The group has also developed very strong links with other regions and with central government so is in a position to share experiences and to influence national policy development.

A lot of work has been done to address the issue of inadequate information, not least the pilot regional information portal which is the Migrant Gateway that some of you will get the opportunity to hear more about in a workshop later. Working very closely alongside this has been the Meeting the Information Needs of Economic Migrants, or MINEM, project with partners in Bulgaria, Portugal, Poland and Spain. MINEM produced the DVD that is on show at various times today and worked with the Migrant Gateway to produce and test 'know-before-you-go' information to assist potential migrants before they left home for the East of England. Both of these projects aim to ensure that important information required by migrants is available to them at appropriate times and in appropriate languages. The gateway also provides information for employers, for service providers, unions and so on. We are now

working with other regions to make this a national resource, sharing the good work that has been developed here in the East.

With regard to access to services, the regional steering group is very much of the opinion that this should be tackled through the new Local Area Agreements. As such, colleagues at the regional assembly have produced a toolkit to assist Local Strategic Partnerships and / or primary tier authorities in the development of their LAAs in terms of taking into account asylum seeker, refugee and migrant worker issues. This is currently out for consultation and should be available by the end of the month.

On housing, we recognise that it is very difficult to separate out housing issues for migrants as if they are different to any other group. The issues here are around the availability and accessibility of appropriate and affordable housing. For now I will simply mention that, as a by-product of some EEDA funding, a report entitled 'Workers on the move: migrant workers, housing and growth in the Eastern region' has been produced by Keystone Development Trust, King Street Housing and Anglia Ruskin University. A copy of this report will be sent to each Local Authority and housing association in the region and it will also be available electronically very shortly.

With regards to skills, this is intrinsically linked to employment and often the need to improve English language skills. Next Friday an English language strategy for migrant workers in the East of England will be launched by our regional minister Barbara Follett.

The purpose of the strategy is to maximise the impact of efforts that address the needs of migrant workers and their employers in relation to English language. It aims to do this by:

- ensuring that ESOL provision in the East of England is responsive to the needs of learners and employers
- delivering high quality ESOL that contributes to the regional economy and social cohesion
- maximising outcomes through the alignment and coordination of efforts / resources from partners across the region; and
- encouraging employers to invest in the skills of migrant workers.

The new European Social Fund programme for this region includes a number of projects that have addressed these areas. The Learning and Skills Council have already tendered and awarded contracts for 'ESOL for BME groups and migrant workers' and for a project around the transfer of qualifications. EEDA will soon be tendering for another programme 'English language training for migrant workers' which we hope will work very closely with the two LSC programmes. All these programmes are included within the new English language strategy.

In terms of research, EEDA has commissioned a longitudinal study of migrant workers to look at their intended length of stay and at what are the barriers to full participation in the regional economy or in the local community. This is innovative in that most research is only a snapshot of what is happening, whereas this study will follow a group of people over a three year period seeing how things change during that time, and how those changes affect their decisions to stay, and so on.

EEDA is also sponsoring a student at Anglia Ruskin University who is tasked with producing quarterly reports bringing together the published data on migration in this region. The reports give an overview of the migration trends and can be made available if anyone is interested,

Today, another EEDA tender closes for a piece of research looking at the potential impact if migrant workers were no longer available. Recent data suggests that there is a slowing down of new arrivals, and indeed a recent report by the Institute for Public Policy Research has shown that many Poles in particular are beginning to return home. Maybe we are already too late in trying to keep workers with the skills that we need.

This study is part of an increasing focus on gathering the economic evidence that supports our very strong belief that migrant workers are good for the East of England. We have commissioned journalist and author Philippe Legrain to write an essay on the importance of migration to the Eastern region. His findings will be discussed by senior people from across the region in order to agree what we need to do to ensure that the East of England attracts and retains the skills that we need if we are to achieve the ambitious targets of the Leitch review and to ensure that we have an economy that is competitive in what is without doubt, a global labour market. Philippe will also talk at the 'Migrants into the mainstream' conference on 25 June in Newmarket. These are all part of a programme of work that EEDA and partners are implementing to demonstrate the value of migrants to our economy, and to society in general.

So what are the benefits when so much of what we see or hear in the media is negative?

Businesses tell us that without migrant labour they might not have survived. In the MINEM DVD a company in Bedford explain how they were considering moving offshore until they found that the skills they needed were available locally. A large agricultural business in Cambridgeshire explain how in the last 10 years their business has grown 400% on the basis of the availability of seasonal labour provided largely by migrants.

What is not easy to measure is the economic impact. How do you measure the benefit, economic or otherwise, of having the significant numbers of Philippino nurses, Polish dentists, and Asian doctors providing NHS healthcare. How can we say how much we benefit from the migrants who serve our teas, coffees, lunches and dinners in hotels, restaurants and conference centres across the region. While we might complain about MRSA in hospitals, how much worse would the situation be if cleaning contractors could not call upon migrant labour to do much of this work?

And as the regional demography changes to a much older profile, who is going to work and pay the taxes that will ensure there is money to pay for our care when we need it? And who is going to do that caring for our parents and ourselves. If we don't have migrants coming to do much of this we better get started on another baby boom pretty damned quick!

There are other benefits too. A more diverse workforce allows for a much more creative environment. If, in a given workplace, there were only 30 year old Bedford lads, the ideas they came up with to resolve any problem would be limited to their common experience. How about if that workplace had people from different countries, of different ages, and women as well as men? The way they thought about the problem, the experience they had of resolving similar problems in the past and how their ideas bounced around the room would be so very much more dynamic. Diversity in the workplace is good for business.

But let's not forget about the challenges. There are some very real issues for individuals, for specific places and for society in general when a significant number of new people arrive in an area. We have all heard about some towns that cannot cope with the large numbers of additional people competing for housing or for places in schools or at the doctor's surgery. There may be some additional costs for local authorities and police services in supporting new communities of people who don't know how things work when they first arrive. But the answer is not to blame them for a situation that they have not created, even though they may have contributed. We need to remember that migration has placed additional pressures on already stretched health and education services, additional demand on housing that is in short supply and so on. The housing report I mentioned earlier will show that migrants are not getting preferential access to social housing but that the vast majority of them are dependent on housing in the private rented sector.

There are answers about. There are some very fine answers in this region – such as providing information at regional level and not leaving it to every local council to produce a welcome pack in several languages. There are ways to ensure that the costs of translation and interpretation are kept to a minimum, but it does not mean providing a poor service on the cheap. We need to work together to find solutions, to pool resources to achieve common goals.

To finish I would like to say that we need to get away from the blame culture that is creeping into our society. Instead of looking for the negative we need to find the positive. There are many reasons why people come to the UK and to our region. Availability of jobs, better pay, a bad job here might be better than a good job at home. And, believe it or not, they actually like it here.

What we must do though, is compete for the people we need so that they do come here rather than to another part of the UK, or to Germany or France, or even America or Australia. In the global labour market we are competing for workers and it is in our own interests to welcome them to the East of England.

Thank you.