

Engaging with immigration policy on the ground: A study of Local Authorities in Scotland

This paper focuses on how policies and practices relating to immigration are developed at the local level. It explores how Local Authorities in Scotland plan for and respond to international migration. The Scottish Government has made it clear that it is keen to attract migrants to Scotland and that it would be more proactive in this if it had the relevant policy levers. However it is Local Authorities that need to respond to inflows of migrants in terms of issues such as service provision or community cohesion. This research was carried out as part of the ESRC Future of the UK and Scotland programme and focussed on 16 Local Authority areas, ranging from cities to remote regions. It raises questions about how the cogent arguments of local policy makers can be better represented in national debates about immigration policy.

Key Points

- Local Authorities viewed immigration as a means of stabilising demographic challenges (such as ageing and population decline) but some expressed concerns about community cohesion and long term integration.
- Only a minority of Local Authorities viewed immigration as purely a means of addressing local labour shortages.
- Insufficient resources were cited by all Local Authorities as a constraint on their capacity to welcome migrants to their communities.
- There is great variation across the country in terms of how local government plans for and responds to migration. Local Authorities were found to respond to immigration in one of three ways; being proactive, reactive or less active.

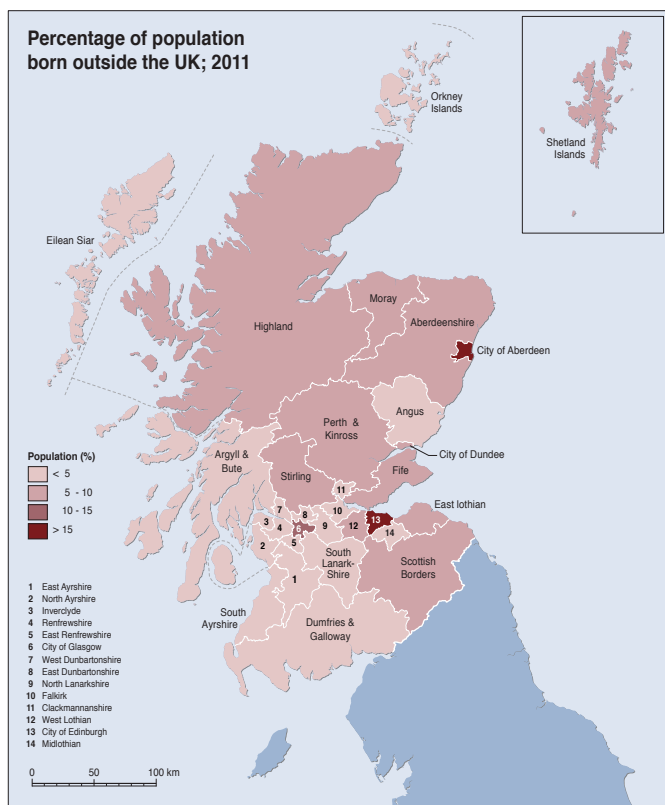
Introduction

The 2011 Census shed fresh light on the varied pattern of immigration across Scotland. Figure 1 shows some Local Authorities with only a small proportion of their population born abroad, for example, North and South Ayrshire

and other areas with in excess of fifteen per cent of its population born outside the UK, Aberdeen and Edinburgh for example. Urban areas have seen rapid growth over the decade. However other council areas such as Perth and Kinross,

Aberdeenshire and West Lothian have also seen significant increases in the proportion of its population born abroad. It is within this context of population change and regional variation that this research sets out to better understand Local Authority responses to migration.

Figure 1 – Percentage of population born outside the UK 2011



Source: NRS 2011 Census data (cartography G Sandeman)

The study

Taking place in the first six months of 2014, the study involved 16 in-depth interviews covering a cross-section of Scottish Local Authorities. Fifty per cent of all Local Authorities were represented. Interviewees were generally Local Authority officers involved in Corporate Planning, Community Planning or Equalities. Interviews centred on three main themes: planning for new migrants, identifying challenges/opportunities and the future direction of policy.

Main findings

Perceptions of immigration

Immigration was widely viewed as both important and advantageous; providing multiple opportunities for the local economy and wider community.

Table 1 provides a summary of the most common benefits and challenges identified by council officers.

Table 1 – Summary of participants' views on the benefits and challenges of immigration locally

Benefits	Challenges
Addresses local labour shortages	Increased demand for English as an Additional Language provision within schools
Addresses the challenges of an ageing population	Creates pressure on interpreting and translation services
Reverses population decline	Potential for local resentment about housing allocation, welfare claims etc.
Enhances cultural diversity within schools and local communities	Ensuring community cohesion

Source: Local Authority Interviews, 2014

All Local Authorities in Scotland have seen a growth in immigration between 2001 and 2011. It is in this context that some interviewees expressed the need to balance the needs of existing communities with the opportunities created by new arrivals. Officers raised concerns about any sudden, unplanned increases in new immigration. They were clear about the challenges following accession in 2004 of new EU member states, and generally felt more confident and better equipped to deal with an increase in immigrants than previously.

Approaches to migration

The interviews revealed that Local Authorities have differing approaches to engaging with issues of migration. Councils were found to respond to immigration in one of three ways; being proactive, reactive or less active. This engagement was largely based on the volume of migrants within the area, the presence of local champions/activists, and access to additional resources for exceeding the statutory obligations.

Table 2 – Summary of participants' approaches to migration

Proactive	Reactive	Less active
Council D has recently undertaken research, recruited migrants or are actively engaged on migrant issues.	Migrants have arrived and Council E has responded providing services above the statutory minimum	Council F fulfils its statutory duties but for a variety of reasons may not have capacity to exceed these.
"We do see migration is very relevant to us. Any approaches to migration, any work around that – we need to be at the table! We're an area that is affected by it!"	"We don't plan because we just don't know! [What] If we had planned for the deluge and it just didn't happen?"	"I don't think migration is key! It's not the foremost of our thoughts, given the public sector funding restraints"

Source: Local Authority Interviews, 2014

Meeting migrant needs

Many officers describe a shift over the last decade in how flows of new immigrants are viewed and catered for. As resources have reduced and planning structures have been refined immigrants are no longer treated as a separate entity.

“

So there's a fear if you start putting people under the heading of 'migrants' that you might actually start to effectively exclude people. You're trying to include them but you're putting a different hat on them. Urban Local Authority

We have tried to adopt an approach which sees migrants as having a range of issues which link to a range of strategies. Urban Local Authority

They're so ingrained in [city] life that they're not seen as migrants or migrant children. They're just [citizens of the city]. Urban Local Authority

”

Immigrants' needs are met alongside the needs of the general population, whether these relate to education, social care, housing etc. Many of the professionals that were interviewed viewed this as a positive step, acknowledging that migrants are not a homogeneous group but also have a range of needs. However, council areas with very few immigrants acknowledged that this often meant that where immigrants are not accessing services their needs can sometimes remain unmet.

Implementing immigration policy at a local level

Interviewees were well-informed, coherent and realistic about the challenge of translating national directives into local policy. They discussed the difficulty of responding to national policy changes at short notice, operationalising complex reforms and forward planning. Many concluded that greater dialogue and preparation time would enable councils to provide higher quality services.

“

There is a frustration I think sometimes with the Scottish Government and a level of frustration with the national government as well. A lot of things ... impact on migrant communities, things like welfare and benefits – those changes to welfare benefits, bringing in a cap. Urban Local Authority

It's all very well having statutory and equality based to duty to deliver interpreting ... of course we would honour that. But [increasing] accessibility in places like X [region] and outlying areas, it's much more difficult... Urban Local Authority

There's no point having powers without having resources. But rather than centralising resources, you could be dispersing the resources so that you could foster local decision making. Rural Local Authority

”

Future directions

Participants were candid about the future of national immigration policy. They reflected on immigration being “the number one issue on the doorstep after the economy” and the need to balance economic and demographic benefits with local concerns. The three quotes below illustrate a range of perspectives on increasing immigration; positive about immigration – especially students, positive about migration with some caveats (e.g. community response) and positive but expressing concerns about the impact of vastly altered immigration policy.

“

We want more migrants! We've had thirty forty years of the area closing basically and it's bouncing back! I would suggest that all the political parties see migrants positively; particularly students. Urban Local Authority

So I think we would feel confident that we could cope [with an increase in migration] but ... what will be the impact on communities if there is a more liberal immigration policy? Because those tensions do play out and it's not something that is being talked about. Urban Local Authority

I think it would be dangerous to think we can fund pensions by increasing migration because what happens when they're older? We'd need to bring in even more and so on. It is possible you could get to the point where people are unhappy that we've got so many people coming in as migrant workers. Rural Local Authority

”

Policy implications

The ability of Local Authorities to manage migration is of significance because it will be a key determinant of whether Scotland can successfully attract and retain the immigrants that it needs to grow its population and economy. This study highlights the challenge of devising national immigration policy without adequate dialogue with local policy and decision makers. Enhancing communication within tiers of government could ensure that migration policy is more responsive, reflective and better informed. This may also ensure a greater consistency of approaches, ensuring all Local Authorities exceed their statutory obligations in relation to immigration.

Authors

Helen Packwood
(University of St Andrews, CPC)

Allan Findlay
(University of St Andrews, CPC)

David McCollum
(University of St Andrews, CPC)

Edited by Becki Dey
(University of Southampton, CPC)

ESRC Centre for Population Change
Building 58
Faculty of Social and Human Sciences
University of Southampton
SO17 1BJ

Office: +44(0)2380592579

www.cpc.ac.uk