

Myths about Immigrants

Many people are welcoming to newcomers and understand the reasons for increased migration negative attitudes persist and may be growing as our unemployment levels rise. (For statistics on attitudes see below.) These are some widely held views.

‘Asylum seekers are taking our jobs’

There are only about 200 applications for asylum in N Ireland each year. Most people seeking sanctuary here are not allowed to work. Almost certainly people are confusing ‘asylum seekers’ with ‘migrant workers’.

‘The migrants are taking our jobs’

‘They drive down wages’

Migrants are usually attracted by job vacancies. They fill skills gaps and labour shortages and often do jobs that local people are not trained to do or prepared to do. Industries such as the food processing industry cannot survive without migrant labour. In some cases employers would have had to move their factories abroad if they had not been able to attract foreign workers. Research has shown that when wages drop it is usually temporary.

‘They don’t contribute to society’

‘They are costing the country money’

‘They send money out of the country’

Foreign workers pay national insurance, tax and rent, and spend money in our local economy on necessities such as clothes and food in the same way as the rest of us do. They do send money to their families but local people lodge money in banks whose headquarters are in other countries, spend money on foreign holidays and many of our purchases, such as food, clothing, furniture and electrical goods are produced abroad.

‘They are only here for the benefits’

‘Migrants are getting everything on social security.’

Newly arrived migrant workers are usually not eligible for most welfare benefits. People from outside Europe usually have their passports stamped ‘No recourse to public funds’ and can only access benefits when they become recognised as residents or citizens which can now take up to 8 years.

‘They get priority in housing’

The Housing Executive allocates social housing from a common waiting list and a standard points-based system, based mostly on need. Some migrant workers are not eligible to apply for social housing. Many still live in privately rented accommodation.

‘They are putting pressure on our schools and the health service’

More people does put increased pressure on local services and extra resources are needed to support special costs e.g. interpretation and helping newly arrived children with their English. On the other hand children from other countries have helped to save some schools from closure and are a

cultural and language resource. The health and care services could not function without the many doctors, nurses and ancillary staff from other countries.

'I don't mind 'them' being here but "they" need to behave.'

When someone from another country commits a crime it stands out and we forget how many local people are convicted of criminal acts. People from other countries are actually more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators. Everyone is subject to the law and should behave. If a migrant worker misbehaves, that should not reflect badly on others from their country or ethnic group. Clear guidelines on our customs and laws should be made available to new arrivals.

Attitudes

The Department of Employment and Learning (DEL) publishes regular attitudinal surveys and these are some of the findings from June 2009.

51% of respondents feel that the Government should place more restrictions on migrant workers

26% of respondents thought Northern Ireland people were very prejudiced towards migrant workers. Only 4% of respondents consider themselves to be very prejudiced

48% of respondents agree or strongly agree that migrant workers are generally good for the local economy

47% of respondents feel that migrant workers take jobs away from people who were born in Northern Ireland

29% of respondents agree or strongly agree that migrant workers come to Northern Ireland just to get social security benefits;

15% of respondents felt that migrant workers were more law abiding than locals

60% of respondents agree or strongly agree that migrant workers are more hardworking than local workers

71% of respondents feel that the number of migrant workers coming to Northern Ireland puts a strain on services

74% of respondents feel that migrant workers mostly take up jobs local workers do not want

84% of respondents think that migrant workers are prepared to work for lower wages than local workers.

To access the full survey, *Attitudes to Migrant Workers: Results from the Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey*, December 2009, go to www.delni.gov.uk/attitudestomigrantworkers (For further surveys on attitudes towards minority-ethnic people, see the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey website: www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/results/minethres.html)