

Myths about Immigrants in Northern Ireland

While many people are welcoming to newcomers, and understand the reasons for increased migration, negative attitudes persist and may have grown as unemployment levels rose during the recession. They have also been fuelled by negative press reports generated in GB where the situation is very different. These are some widely held views.

‘Asylum seekers are taking our jobs’

There are only a few hundred applications for asylum in N Ireland each year and 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 could not 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. Evidence from the NI Strategic Migration Partnership indicates that there are still difficulties in attracting local workers in sectors such as health, agriculture and IT. For their own sake, it is important that local young people obtain the education and skills to enable them to step into available jobs.

If wages drop because of immigration is usually temporary but wages have remained static generally during the recession.

‘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.’

‘They get Jobseekers Allowance the minute they get off the plane’

It has not always been possible to establish a right to JSA immediately and since January 2014 European jobseekers are not eligible for benefits until they have been in the UK for three months. Advice workers had already been reporting lengthy delays for some foreign nationals accessing benefits, possibly because officials are not used to the different rules that apply to them. Some people are able to import their local jobseekers benefits with them, if they organise it before they leave their home country. These are paid through our system and the UK is reimbursed later.

Department of Work and Pensions figures for 2013 indicate that less than 5% of European Union migrants were claiming jobseekers allowance and less than 10% were claiming other DWP working-age benefits.

www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/commentary/costs-and-‘benefits’-benefits-tourism-what-does-it-mean From March 2014, European migrants coming to the UK have to earn at least £149 a week for three months before they can access a range of benefits. Migrant workers from outside Europe are usually not entitled to out-of-

work benefits for at least five 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. The NIHE manages around 89,000 properties but there were just 1032 migrant worker households who were NIHE tenants as of 31 July 2013. www.nihe.gov.uk/black_and_minority_ethnic_and_migrant_worker_mapping_update_february_2014.pdf The 2011 Census showed that 76% of migrants from Central and Eastern Europe were living in privately rented accommodation.

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

Increase numbers of people do put increased pressure on local services and extra resources are needed to support special costs e.g. interpretation and helping newly arrived children with language difficulties. 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.

‘They choose to live together and we could be stuck with ghettos’

Rather than renting to local families, landlords with a group of houses may choose to let single rooms to foreign nationals because this produces more rent. This is not the fault of people from other countries. People do sometimes follow each other to areas they think will be safe, because of earlier attacks elsewhere. Others just go where houses are empty and affordable. It is difficult for local people to be critical about other people clustering together when many of us live in areas that are already very segregated in other ways.

‘It is in their culture to get together and drink in their houses’

The same might be said of local youngsters who leave home to go to university, for example, and make life a pain for their neighbours. The answer is not to label whole nations of people but to build relationships and find ways of making it clear to people what is and what is not acceptable behaviour.

‘They are contributing to increased crime’

As the numbers of foreign nationals living here rises, it is inevitable that some commit offences and freedom of movement has made organised crime easier but people from other countries are still more likely to be victims of crime than perpetrators. This is not always evident in statistics as they are less likely to report crime victimisation. Research in England and Wales between 2001 and 2008 showed that neither people seeking asylum, nor European migrants had much effect on violent crime. There was a slight increase in property crime in areas where numbers of people seeking asylum rose (possibly because asylum applicants are not allowed to work) but a decrease in property crime where there was an increase in A8 European migrants. See the Migration Observatory’s online briefing: ‘Immigration and Crime: Evidence for the UK and Other Countries’. www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/immigration-and-crime-evidence-uk-and-other-countries

‘I don’t mind ‘them’ being here but “they” need to behave.’

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.

See also **Opinions on Migration** Fact Sheet www.embraceni.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Opinions-on-Immigration-in-NI.pdf