

A8 Nationals in the Borough of Poole

Stage Three Report

Experiences of Polish Migrant Workers:

Practicalities of Migration

**Corporate Research Team, Borough of Poole,
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Project Background

This report is the second of two papers written in response to a demand for local insight to develop understanding of the experiences of migrant workers coming to England from Poland following the latter's accession to the European Union in 2004. Although much work has been undertaken into the numbers of Polish people coming to England during this period, there remains a lack of empirically grounded studies on the more human aspects of A8¹ migration, such as the social impact on, and implications for, both the migrants and the destination community.

As the Audit Commission has noted, "Areas with limited experience of diversity and change may have had limited arrangements for interpretation, and community organisations with little experience of providing relevant support. Local people may be more conscious of, and concerned about, rapid change where it is more obvious because it is new" (Audit Commission, 2007).

The Borough of Poole is one of many such areas. A small Unitary Authority with a population of around 137,000, its non UK-born population at the time of the last Census² was measured at 4.5% - only seventy-eight of whom were born in Poland.

Since May 2004, 2,050 Polish migrants have registered for work in Poole³. Even given the limitations of these 'official' figures⁴, this represents a significant diversification of the local population that is clearly notable around the Borough. Employers, schools, churches, hospitals, doctors, banks and local housing, employment and advice agencies have all reported notable increases in the numbers of Polish nationals engaging with their services.

This report therefore looks further into the information gathered through interviews with fifteen Polish migrant workers who have come to the Borough since May 2004. Whilst the first report considered motivation, adaptation and settlement, this second paper looks into the more practical aspects of migration. It considers elements such as the level and nature of work undertaken, and the barriers to career progression; the location and affordability of housing occupied by Polish migrants in the Borough; how their time is spent beyond working hours; and access to and use of key local services. In doing so it aims to offer evidence and direction to enable informed decision making with regard to future policy and service delivery within the Borough.

¹ A8 Countries are Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic.

² 2001 Census data: www.statistics.gov.uk

³ Workers Registration Scheme March 2008.

⁴ WRS figures do not include families or dependents of migrant workers, there is no deregistration data and self employed migrants don't have to register.

Employment

Most of the fifteen migrants interviewed had sought work before coming to England. Their responses indicate a growing number of agencies, newspapers and websites in Poland offering and facilitating jobs in the UK. A number of local recruitment agencies and employers have begun to tap into these channels – attending trade fairs, forming recruitment partnerships and actively seeking staff in Poland to fill perceived gaps in the UK market.

In terms of the process of migration, the participants noted that gaining employment in England prior to their migration from Poland helped immensely on arrival. Already having an employer gave a point of reference that assisted them with the completion of paperwork, enabled them to set up bank accounts and services (eg. telephones), and to find housing – often employers were able to provide or assist with initial accommodation.

“It was really easy as my employer helped me. So I had the forms ready but I had to fill them in. They did most of it for me though, so when I came most of it was done”.

“They rented the home and we paid £60 a week. They told us it was for a year. For the time when we will feel better and we can do this by ourselves”.

As noted in the previous report, the participants were employed in one of three sectors – industrial work, hospitality/catering and social care. Almost all of those interviewed were working for their employers on a permanent contract basis. Generally this work was full time, although notably characterised by shift work that included weekends and anti-social hours – reflecting the requirements of their chosen sectors.

On average, the participants worked 42 hours per week, although some worked up to 60 hours in order to maximise their opportunities to save money. Their earning potential primarily dictated by their employment sector. Those participants undertaking skilled work in the industrial sector tended to earn more money than those in the social care or hospitality sectors – the latter tending to pay around the minimum wage. Overall, earnings on average were approximately £7 per hour.

Unfortunately, the positions achieved locally by the participants often failed to match their potential. Six of the participants had achieved degree qualifications in Poland, and a further two had swapped positions of significant responsibility to work at a basic level in Poole. Only four of the participants felt that they were working at a similar level to what they would obtain had they remained in Poland. However, the current economic disparity between the two nations meant that even basic-level jobs in England paid more attractively.

“I have a masters degree, and it was five years of study. But I don’t need to have a masters degree if I want to be a social worker”.

“No, I don’t think so. After a year when my language had improved a little bit I tried to get a job in recruitment, because after sociology I can do it. And I couldn’t find anything”.

Perhaps most telling were the participants’ aspirations for the future. Currently working in industry, social work and catering, they ideally hoped to achieve positions as teachers, teaching assistants, psychologists, beauticians, travel agents, local government officers, recruitment agents or to improve their opportunities by achieving additional professional or academic qualifications.

“I think I would like to work with children, nurseries with small children. I would like that. But I don’t know how to do this really”.

“I am now studying social sciences at the Open University. It is first a certificate in social sciences, then I shall decide if to go for a degree in psychology”.

When questioned, they perceived two particular barriers to achieving these aims. The most significant of these was language. Often they felt that they were unable to aspire to their preferred role until they had improved their grasp of the English language – that their choices were limited to those roles where language was less important.

“I want to do beauticians, but I need to go to school first. I was thinking about studying but it is very hard for me now because my English is inadequate”.

“When he came here my husband started working in catering and he was looking for being a bus driver, but they said then he didn’t speak really good English.”

“I would like to know of the local government functions. What is going on in this building, what the party is here. What the programmes are, what the motions. But I am really far, far away to communicate on this level”.

The second barrier was qualification – and in particular the recognition in England of qualifications achieved in Poland. There were two aspects to this. Firstly the translation of documents produced in Polish into the English language in order to prove that the qualification had been achieved. Secondly, in terms of the comparability of qualifications, and to what extent qualifications achieved in Poland match those in England – for example a number of the participants had achieved ‘masters’ degrees in Poland, but felt that these may be at a similar level to first degrees in England. Uncertainty over these aspects prevented them from following new opportunities.

“Basically, I had a forklift license, crane licence, and here I can’t drive forklift because nobody knows what the licence means, so they won’t let me do it. It’s in Polish so nobody understands it. I say ‘I can translate it for you’ but nobody trusts you”.

“Actually I’m not sure if my qualifications are recognised. All of my papers I have to translate it and send it to some office and they will sort it for me if my qualifications are ok and I can work here as a teacher assistant or teacher. I don’t know”.

Housing

When finding housing in Poole, the participants’ main priority was living close to their place of work. In doing so they hoped to minimise the cost and length of their regular commute. If an area close to work was impractical, housing on transport routes to work or close to local facilities were preferred. According to the participants, particular concentrations of Polish migrants appear to be developing in Parkstone and Branksome – most notably around Ashley Road, Bournemouth Road, Herbert Avenue and Rossmore Road - as well as in Poole Town centre.

“I was looking actually in the middle – something between Bournemouth and Poole. Because I was working in Poole and my husband in Bournemouth so we was looking for the middle”.

“I would say Parkstone, there are quite many of them in the shared houses. I think like, Bournemouth Road and Ashley Road, around there. I can hear always Polish voices around there when I am shopping”.

On arrival in England six of the of the participants were living in housing provided by their employer, however, all but three had since moved to private accommodation. Primarily this

was sourced directly from estate agents in the area, although Internet sites such as 'Gumtree' and the listings in local papers were also used.

The price of housing in Poole was of particular concern to many of the participants. Given their limited earnings, their desire to put some money aside, and the increased expense of living in England compared to Poland they tended to gravitate towards areas of cheaper accommodation, or shared houses with friends or colleagues to spread the cost. Ten of the fifteen migrants interviewed lived in homes that could be classified as 'in multiple occupation', although none were currently sharing a bedroom with anyone but their partner.

On average, the participants were paying £105 per week on accommodation. However, this figure is slightly misleading as it includes a number of differing perspectives. For example, migrants living as individuals in shared accommodation tended to quote their own personal costs of around £60-£75 per week inclusive of bills, whereas those sharing houses or flats with friends or family quoted the cost of the accommodation as a whole, usually between £120-£160 per week, excluding bills.

"The rent was £260 a month from my first salary, it was quite high and my husband still wasn't working. . . When we were searching for a flat in the area it came out that the prices were even double that. So we were quite shocked, and I thought ' what are we doing here. How will we cope?"

"If I wanted to bring my wife and kid and live on our own. That's not possible to do it, because you get £1,000 a month [wages] and you have to pay. . . for this flat for example we pay £650, that's only rent, then council tax it's £104 a month, so that gives you £750 plus gas, water – so that's like £850, so you have got left £150. It's not possible".

"For this one we are paying £550 per month, plus council tax and bills. Before we lived with four people and it was £675. Now I only live with my boyfriend, that's why it's more. But we want to stay, just two of us is better".

Cost was therefore seen as a key issue in finding housing in the Borough, but it was not the only problem the participants faced. Some had found issues with the condition of the property, such as damp, mould, or too small rooms. Others had found it difficult to live with strangers. The participants also reported strained relations with private landlords, exacerbated by their lack of response to arising problems, or non-return of deposits on termination of the tenancy.

"When we moved in there it was very nice, all fresh paint and we were very happy with this flat, but after 3 months there was mildew halfway up the walls in all the house. It was horrible because my cousin she had borne a baby, and it was quite dangerous. I had spots on my skin so it was horrible".

"At first I was living with a stranger. It was not very nice, in the beginning. There was one bloke, he was English, but he was only there for a few weeks. Then another girl from Poland came. I didn't know anything about each other, and you have to share a kitchen and you are together most of the time".

"I just don't understand the rules, like with deposit, and when they will check if everything is alright, and then after six months when you try to get your money back it's really hard".

Accessing Local Services

Childcare

Childcare emerged as a key issue for the six participants who had considered bringing their families to Poole. These migrants had found that both parents needed to work in order to afford to live as a family unit. However, the practicalities of doing this with small children were very difficult as, with most friends and family remaining in Poland, they were unable to rely on this wider network of support. Some addressed the issue by working opposite shifts, with obvious worrying implications for family life. However, even these parents found that there were 'tricky' times when they needed to make other childcare arrangements – such as before and after school/nursery and during school holidays. However, formal childcare was perceived to be expensive and not necessarily available when needed, and as a consequence some had unfortunately concluded it would be easier for their families to stay in Poland.

“I had to start at 8am, my son starts school at 9am, what to do before that? There was breakfast club at school, but from 8:15am, so every minute was so problematic to cope with”.

“I am thinking about bringing here my mum, because I need help. I would not cope with it on my own. I have to work because I need money and my daughter needs to go to school and she has to have somebody to bring her to school and take her from school. So it is very hard, very difficult”.

Citizens Advice Bureau

There was a notable level of awareness of Citizens Advice amongst the participants, and some had first hand experience of approaching the Bureau for help. The participants' knowledge of Citizens Advice had primarily emerged through word of mouth – suggesting further usage amongst other migrants. The participants had also seen reference to Citizens Advice in the local Polish papers, which provided explanations of what the Bureau was, where it was located and how it might be able to assist them.

“I know where is the Citizens Advice, and one time we had a problem and my friend wanted to use them so, to get advice from them, that's how I found out where it is”.

“I get Citizens Advice from my doctor and some friends also. They said if I ever had any problems if I am sick or something and don't have any money I can go there, they can help me”.

Council

To date, the participants' contact with the Council had been minimal. Not entitled to benefits, most saw no obvious need to visit the Council, and were unsure of the other services it offered. Where contact did occur, this had been in response to housing related issues such as overpayment of Council Tax, finding accommodation, or for assistance in dealing with landlords.

“I was going to Council because I was having problem with Council Tax. So I was going there and it was hard for me to talk to those people because I explained everything and I don't know if they understand”.

“I don't know [about benefits] because I was never interested in using things like that. But maybe I can try to get things like that. I really don't know”.

Language Courses

Uptake of language courses amongst the interviewed migrants was limited. Seven had tried to enrol, only five of whom had completed their course. Course uptake was to a great extent dependent upon two factors – level of English prior to arrival in the UK, and, as noted in the previous report, time available in which to study.

The participants' narratives suggest that whilst younger migrants appear to have had the opportunity to study English at school in Poland, this was mainly at a basic level and an addition to the curriculum that was less widely available to earlier generations. Those who wished to better their language skills could opt for private tuition, but this was at additional cost. As a result, there is likely to be a notable variation in terms of English language ability amongst Polish migrants currently arriving into the area. What was common, however, was that the participants had very little experience of using English in everyday life, and aspired to improve their opportunities for doing so.

“I didn't do English at school, no. We actually didn't have a choice. Now kids they do learn English, basic at primary school and before that. We didn't have a choice. I did Russian or German”.

“I did three years at school but it's a different level, it's a lower level at school really, because they won't teach you so much. But if you pay, you can get a really good school, a private school and they will teach you more”.

“I started learning when I was twelve in Poland but it was very basic. I was learning until the end of my studies and I finished last year. So that is all. And I can't speak with English people so it is completely different”.

Healthcare

Unfortunately there appeared to be a lack of consistency amongst the participants with regard to registering for healthcare services. Whilst around two thirds were registered with a GP at the time of interview, there was often a considerable delay in doing so after entering the country. Those with children or required by their employer to provide details of a GP were most likely to have registered. In addition, very few of the participants were registered with a local dentist. It appears that the participants had a responsive attitude towards contact with these services, preferring to return to Poland to visit their 'own' practitioner for check-ups and more routine procedures. This was mainly due to familiarity; the long-term trust developed with the practitioner, and their particular knowledge of ongoing problems, but also with the language – being comfortable discussing medical issues in English was perceived to require a greater level of ability than everyday conversation.

“I am not registered with a doctor or dentist yet. I have been here only for four months, so hopefully I don't have to”.

“I registered with a doctor yesterday. I have never been registered here because I feel alright. When I go to Poland I do my teeth with my friend because she is a dentist so I have never registered with a dentist as well. But I registered yesterday in case actually, but two years I have not done here”.

“I know there is a few Polish nurses in our hospital here, but, you know, when you need somebody, they're not about. You can scream but no-one will know why. They can listen but they don't understand you”.

Police

Around a third of the participants had been in direct contact with the police since arriving in Poole, mainly due to cultural misunderstandings or as victims of low-level crime. Generally these migrants had a positive view of the police. In contrast to their experiences of policing in Poland, they had found that the police could be helpful and understanding in enforcing the law. As a result, they were less wary of seeking assistance.

“My employers gave me a car. . .so I thought it is a good idea to go for a drive . .The police stopped me because there was a red light on the road and I just driving. But he saw that I was driving very slow and it wasn’t something dangerous because it wasn’t anybody on the road. . . He asked me to go back home now until tomorrow, and he said do you need any help going back home, and do you know where you are. So it was horrible but they were really nice to me. It’s rubbish in Poland. They only give you the punishment, you need to pay a lot of money and that is all. They don’t talk to you”.

“My bike and two other bikes were stolen from my garden. I asked and the police were really helpful. Of course they couldn’t find it because it just disappears. But the way they acted and the attention they paid to me – they really tried to sort out the problems.”

Finance

The participants’ narratives suggest that opening a bank account is one of the first tasks undertaken on arrival in England. However, issues have arisen around the provision of identity documents. At this stage the Home Office also requires documentation (eg. a passport) to approve registration for work, and participants living in shared houses had difficulty in providing bills as confirmation of address. Unfortunately, this led to a situation whereby without a bank account, participants were unable to receive their wages. It seems however, that this situation is easing as banks are proving adaptable to the differing needs of migrant workers – with some accepting ID cards instead of passports to open an account.

“I did get stuck with the bank account at the beginning, because when I sent my passport to the Home Office I had to wait for it and then no chance to open the bank account. I have to wait three weeks more for my first money”.

“Setting up a bank was difficult. I didn’t have a job and they wanted to know about my job. But when I got a job I was staying with my boyfriend’s parents and so I had no address to show them. It was difficult”.

Issues with finance have, however, arisen in other areas. Most of the participants were struggling to understand the workings of the UK tax system – both their rate of payment and procedures for changing jobs. This issue was exacerbated as the primary means of contact with the Inland Revenue was the telephone, which affected their ability to communicate their problems. (see Motivation, Networks & Integration report for further discussion on this area).

There also appears to be a lack of clarity about benefits – and about child benefit in particular. Participants with children in the UK had found themselves caught in the CSA backlog. Those who had children in Poland were unclear about their rights and had been given conflicting advice leading to uncertainty and missed opportunity.

“I heard from my friends that you can claim for something. I said, ‘well my kid went back to Poland’ and they said ‘so what, if he is in Poland you can still claim for some benefits’. I went to the job centre and I asked, and the lady said, ‘is your kid here?’, I said ‘no he is in Poland’, so she said you can’t do anything. I don’t know who’s right or who’s wrong here”.

“I just started to apply for child benefit very long time ago. It was November last year and I heard nothing yet because they are checking it for seven months. I am very upset on it because I need money for my daughter and they don’t want to give it for me”.

Free Time

When not at work, the participants engaged in a range of activities with one common denominator – minimum cost. They particularly enjoyed spending time exploring the local area, visiting the beach, or the local countryside – getting out and about in the fresh air. Days off and evenings were also seen as time to meet friends (often sharing meals or BBQ's at home) or simply to relax in front of the television (the participants noted that many of their compatriots are bringing CYFRE+ or POLESAT satellite dishes over in order to access Polish TV).

“I have a daughter so I spend most of the time with her. We are playing in the garden or are walking or we are going to the swimming pool”.

“Usually we just meet with our friends. In summer we are very often making a barbecue, or just spending time together or going on the beach or something like that”.

“With nature, definitely. We are going out to the country, just to be out of town. Just somewhere in the wild”.

“The first half year I didn't do nothing, just sitting at home watching TV. I've got Polish TV”.

On Sundays, the Polish church service in Bournemouth is well attended, although some of the participants noted that they had also ventured into English Catholic churches when unable to attend at Sacred Heart.

“I try to go to church every week. It is important to me. The language, you understand what to answer during the ceremony, you know what to do”.

“There is a church on the street near Rosemary Road. I met the priest and he asked me what I am doing in church and I said that I was just wanting to see. And the next Sunday, he said that ‘oh, we've got a new woman in the church, she is from Poland. So it was really nice, you know, because he remembered about me”.

In terms of local facilities, the participants had made use of the gym, the Dolphin swimming pool and the library. This latter service was felt to be of particular use, providing both Polish texts, and the opportunity to read English books and thereby improve their language.

“Now I am in England I have to read English books. Because they are very expensive in Poland, if you want to buy English books they are exported from the UK, so I have a chance to read English books so it is good”.

“I find the libraries very good, and I was surprised to find that in the Central Library there are Polish books”.

The most common sources of information used by the participants to find out about these activities, and more generally about things going on in the area, were the Internet, local newspapers (both Polish and English) and word of mouth from friends and colleagues, although the church, the library and leaflet drops were also mentioned.

“A lot of information I am looking for it on the Internet. So I can find everything on the Internet. There is a lot of Polish forums so we can find information there”.

“I tried to read some stuff on the Internet, to check some adverts in the paper, for what's going on in several days, like what the gig is, and then next week, where can I go to see something interesting. I was asking friends, ‘where can I go to spend a lovely time?’”.

The Interviewees

In total, fifteen Polish migrant workers took part in this study, nine of whom were female, and six who were male. Their ages ranged from 22 to 44, although most were in their twenties or early thirties.

The most significant change arising from EU expansion in 2004 was that the British job market was opened up to A8 nationals. Polish workers were now able to move to England freely and seek legal employment in accordance with the Worker Registration Scheme. Occupation was therefore chosen as the participants' defining characteristic. In particular, the migrants were employed in one of three specific sectors – industry, hospitality or social care. Over two thirds of Polish workers in Poole fall into one of the first two groups (LGAR 2008). The third group was chosen due to the high proportion of Poles amongst the social care workforce in Poole – a key function of the Local Authority.

Although the primary criterion for recruitment was employment type, the project also encompassed participants with varied durations of stay in England. It was particularly interesting to speak to migrants who were very new to the country, having arrived only a few months or, in one case, weeks ago, and to consider their 'raw' perspectives in relation to those of migrants who had been in England for one, two or three years. On average, the participants had already lived in England for one and a half years, although the most common term was two years.

The participants also had a wide range of personal circumstances in England, enabling the influences of family and friendship on the decision-making and integration process to be considered. Three had brought their partner and two their children, three had migrated to England with their friends, two lived with English friends or partners, and five had migrated alone - leaving their friends and family in Poland and living with strangers in shared houses.

A8 Nationals in the Borough of Poole

This report is the third in a series of three papers looking at the migrant worker population in Poole. The second report also considered the experiences of Polish migrant workers, concentrating specifically on motivation, networks and integration, whilst the first report provided a review of existing data and statistics on all A8 nationals in the Borough of Poole.

For further information on the project please contact Corporate Research on (01202) 633367 or visit our website at www.boroughofpoole.com/research

