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Exploring the housing needs of migrant workers in Harlow and Broxbourne

Executive Summary

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The study

It is accurate to say that all areas of the UK have experienced migration of some kind, whether it is long-established migrant communities, dispersed asylum seekers and refugees, or migrant workers. In recent years, the term migrant worker has been increasingly associated with individuals from the new EU countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

It was recognised that, since 2004, a large number of Central and Eastern European migrants had moved into Harlow and Broxbourne. To meet the challenge of providing responsive services, the overall aim of this study was to enhance intelligence in relation to CEE migrant communities, focusing specifically on housing needs and experiences.

The study was commissioned by Harlow District and Broxbourne Borough Councils in January 2010 through the Migration Impacts Fund. This funding was created by money collected from migrant communities (for example through visas) and allocated to all regions of England for projects which focus on understanding and managing the impacts of migration at a local level.

The study was conducted by Salford Housing & Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) at the University of Salford. The study was greatly aided by research support from a number of community interviewers. The project was managed by a steering group composed of officers representing Harlow District and Broxbourne Borough Council.

The study involved a survey of **370** CEE migrants and consultation with **7** key stakeholders and service providers.

Findings from the survey

The characteristics of the sample

- 267 interviews were carried out in Harlow and 103 in Broxbourne;
- The majority of respondents were Polish (71%); however, a range of nationalities were represented in the sample, including (in order of frequency): Latvian, Lithuanian, Hungarian, Slovak, Estonian, Romanian, Czech and Bulgarian.
- The majority of respondents were aged 25 – 39 years (64%);
- 52% of the respondents were male and 48% were female;
- 41% of the sample were single; 34% were married; and 25% were cohabiting;
- 31% of respondents had children living with them, the majority of which were under 5 years of age;

- 44% of respondents had lived somewhere else in the UK before moving to the study area; and
- The main reasons for choosing Harlow or Broxbourne were because they had family / friends in these areas or a job to come to.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide a full discussion of the characteristics of the sample.

Education and employment

- 8% had postgraduate degree level qualifications; 10% had degree level qualifications; and 33% had technical / vocational qualifications;
- 43% of respondents had a trade or skill from their home country, with IT skills, construction related trades, mechanic and driving skills being mentioned most frequently;
- 81% of respondents were currently in paid employment; a large proportion of those without employment were married females;
- 51% of people were employed in elementary occupations (i.e. lower skilled occupations). A number of people made reference to undertaking agency work;
- A large proportion of people were working within the district in which they were living rather than travelling outside for work; for example, three quarters of the employed Harlow respondents were working in Harlow, while two thirds of the Broxbourne sample were working in Broxbourne;

Chapter 6 of the report provides a full discussion of the findings in relation to education and employment.

Accommodation experiences

- 37% of respondents were living in terraced housing and 36% in purpose built flats. Comparing the two areas, the percentage of people living in terraced housing in Harlow was higher (50%), reflecting the housing stock in Harlow.
- 82% of respondents were living in the private rented sector; with just 2% living in socially rented accommodation;
- 63% of those in rented accommodation had a tenancy agreement. This percentage was lowest for those renting from a private landlord (49%);
- 37% of respondents had found their current accommodation through friends/ family. This was followed by directly approaching letting agencies (27%) or through local newspapers (16%);
- There was evidence of 3, 4 and 5 people sharing bedrooms, as well as other rooms within properties (such as the living room) being used to sleep in.

- 29% of respondents said that they would move to a different property in the future; 65% of these wanted to live in private rented accommodation while 13% wanted socially rented accommodation.

Chapter 7 of the report provides a full discussion of housing experiences.

Community and neighbourhood

- Social connections (i.e. presence of friends / family), affordable accommodation and proximity to facilities were the main reasons for living in their particular neighbourhood;
- 72% of people were satisfied with their local area as a place to live;
- 13% of respondents had no contact with British people; 88% of these respondents were in Harlow. Language barrier was the main reason for having no contact;
- 14% of respondents indicated that they had been victims of some form of crime or anti-social behaviour; 5% of respondents had experienced hate crime; and

Chapter 8 of the report provides a full discussion in relation to community involvement and engagement.

Future intentions

- 58% of respondents were unsure of how long they would stay in the study area. The respondents in Harlow were more likely to indicate that they would stay indefinitely than those in Broxbourne (22% and 9% respectively); and
- With regards to those who intended to leave, the majority would be returning to their home country rather than moving to another area of the UK.

Chapter 9 of the report provides a full discussion in relation to future intentions of the respondents.

Conclusions

The following provides a summary of the main conclusions of the study.

Employment, education and language

The respondents were diverse in terms of their skills and experiences. Contrary to the perceptions of stakeholders a large proportion of respondents were working within Harlow and Broxbourne rather than travelling outside these areas. Agency work was also common amongst the sample, providing 'easy' access to employment.

Like previous studies, the survey indicated that there were highly qualified people working in elementary occupations. While language skills were not explicit focus of study, language barriers are a pertinent issue for CEE migrants (and other migrant communities). Previous research has shown that while some people will actively seek

English classes, others want to learn a basic level of English that will enable them to 'get by'. Furthermore, there are also those who are not interested in learning English as their work / home life is spent with people from their home country. Migrant communities therefore need to be encouraged to access English language courses, with more emphasis placed on the importance of acquisition of English language. In order to do so, however, there is potentially a need to explore the development of flexible learning opportunities, which enable people to study around their work commitments.

Community and neighbourhood

A common theme running throughout the study was the importance of social networks. Having friends / family living in Harlow or Broxbourne was vital for many people, not only influencing their decision to move to particular areas, but assisting with access to employment and accommodation. Given that people tend to move to areas where they have existing social networks – but also linked to the private rental market (see below) – the current patterns of settlement are likely to continue, with concentrations of migrants in particular areas.

In relation to experiences of hate crime, there were similar levels (if not a little lower) than other studies carried out with CEE migrants. Comparing Harlow and Broxbourne, however, indicated that migrant workers in Harlow were more likely to experience hate crime (7%, compared to 1% in Broxbourne). While this research has focused on the experiences of migrant communities, there is a need to consider the 'settled' population in the receiving neighbourhoods and their perception of how the arrival of migrant communities has affected their neighbourhood. Understanding what some of the issues are for local people is perhaps one of the steps to being able to break down the barriers that can sometimes occur.

Accommodation

The research has shown, like previous studies, the importance of the private rented sector for CEE migrants. Within this, there were a number of issues that were highlighted; for example, sharing rooms with non-family members, conditions of properties, repairs not being carried out, lack of tenancy agreement and issues with deposits (all of which related primarily to private landlords). This suggests a need to continue work around standards / enforcement in private rented sector.

However, while it is recognised that some migrants had experienced problems with private landlords, the study indicated that it is perhaps too simplistic to focus solely on the actions of landlords. Rather, we need to also acknowledge the actions and choices of migrants themselves, particularly in relation to economic opportunities. For example, there was evidence that people will live in overcrowded accommodation – sometimes sub-letting without landlords knowing – as it enabled them to minimise rental costs. However, we also need to recognise that the cost of renting relative to wages – particularly as many were working in lower skilled occupations – made sharing with a number of people the only viable option.

A small proportion of the sample indicated that they had experienced homelessness. With regards to the scale of homelessness amongst migrant workers we need to consider people's understanding of the concept of homelessness, with perhaps a lack of understanding that homelessness goes beyond street homelessness and

rough sleeping. 'Hidden homelessness' has emerged as feature for some migrants. For example, twenty-five people indicated that they had stayed with friends / family at some time because they had nowhere else to live, while twenty-one people were currently staying with friends / family because they could not afford their own accommodation.

Furthermore, stakeholder consultation in Broxbourne highlighted that a review of their allocations policy was being undertaken, with a view to recommending if / how policy should change in the future. This included suggested changes such as allocation based on 'local connection', worklessness, etc. Consideration may be needed as to how this may impact on ability of migrant communities to access socially rented accommodation.

What was apparent, however, was that there was a low reliance on, and low aspirations for, socially rented accommodation. This is an important issue to highlight given the public perception – and one which can sometimes feature in the media – that migrant communities are 'taking Council houses' or receiving preferential treatment in terms of housing allocations. Indeed, the survey showed that – despite experiencing some issues and problems – private rented accommodation remained the preference. Consideration needs to be given, however, to the fact that a number of people (22%) did not understand their rights / entitlement in relation to house; therefore lack of demand could be a reflection of this and dissemination of information could lead to increased demand (as was demonstrated by the example given in the stakeholder consultation relating to increased demand for shared ownership resulting from dissemination events).

Future considerations

Unfortunately, it is difficult to predict future intentions, particularly with regards to a population whose migration is predominantly linked to economic opportunities and social networks. While it was often the case that people initially had short-term intentions, it was apparent that a number of people had actually been in the UK longer-term; for example, 57% of respondents had arrived in the UK prior to 2008. It was also highlighted that opportunities in the UK – in terms of job opportunities, welfare, education, etc. – were still potentially better than opportunities in their home countries. Furthermore, while number of people registering for work has slowed, the official data indicated that people were still registering in Harlow and Broxbourne, with the survey including a number of people who had arrived more recently (i.e. 2009 / 2010).

In addition, a number of participants had children (31% of the sample). Consultation with CEE migrants in this study – as well as previous research – highlighted that families were more likely to settle in the UK. This study did not focus on the needs and experiences of children, or cover the implications of an increase in CEE migrants' children on local services such as early years and nursery provision, plus health care and schools. This may therefore be an area for further consideration.

Finally, this study represents a 'snap shot' of a population, providing a starting point for key stakeholders to begin looking at how to take the findings of the report forward and where further information is required. The official data that is currently available is problematic and cannot provide figures on the 'stock' of migrants in a local authority area. It is hoped that the 2011 Census will provide a clearer picture;

however, service providers need to ensure that they are frequently monitoring population changes within their local area and sharing this information at a wider level.