



Consultation Response to:

Home Affairs Committee

Immigration Inquiry

March 2017

About NISMP

The Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership (NISMP) works across the spheres of government and between the public, private and third sectors to ensure that Northern Ireland effectively welcomes, supports and integrates new migrants in a way which contributes to economic growth and vibrant, cohesive communities. It provides a regional advisory and consultative function, enabling our partners and other stakeholders to develop an appropriate approach to the management of migration in Northern Ireland.

This response has been approved by representatives on the Partnership. However this does not necessarily reflect the views of Partner Organisations, some of whom have not been canvassed.

Inquiry Response

NISMP welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry on immigration and the inclusive and consultative approach being adopted by Home Affairs Select Committee.

In this response we have grouped our remarks under the six questions proposed by the Committee.

- **What approach should the Government take to different kinds of migration – for example skilled, unskilled, family migration, students and refugees?**

1. Any approach to migration control must take into account the varied and sometimes opposing economic and social priorities which exist throughout the nations and regions of the UK. Regional economies differ greatly as do the communities which are sustained by them. In Northern Ireland a notable theme running through almost half of the outcomes in the Programme for Government is our interconnectivity with the wider world. Immigration legislation can either support or inhibit the delivery of these outcomes. Any approach to migration must therefore give due weight to the priorities of the devolved administrations. Government must recognise regional differences and take an approach to migration which supports the devolved administrations in delivering their own particular economic and social priorities.
2. The current one size fits all approach to skilled migration has undoubtedly impacted on the ability of Northern Ireland employers to compete equally with competitor companies based elsewhere in the UK. Evidence from Northern Ireland employers working in the IT, pharmaceutical, and health care sectors (included in previous NISMP consultation

responses¹) suggests that Tier 2 criteria, in not recognising different regional circumstances, has created an internal market within the UK. This has resulted in NI employers losing staff to competitors located elsewhere in the UK due to their inability to meet Tier 2 salary requirements. These regional differences should be appropriately accounted for in any approach to migration and Northern Ireland employers and stakeholders must be closely consulted at all stages.

3. The one size fits all approach to the family migration income threshold has also disproportionately impacted on families in Northern Ireland, again due to the lower salaries generally available in the region. As with skilled migration, any approach to family migration must reflect regional differences in income with policy developed in close consultation with Northern Ireland stakeholders.
4. The intention behind the Immigration Act to create a ‘hostile environment for illegal migrants’ has, in its implementation, contributed to an environment which could be perceived as hostile for many migrants. In Northern Ireland there is anecdotal evidence that the increase in penalties for employers of illegal workers introduced in the 2014 Act led to heightened concern among employers resulting in the threatened dismissal of entirely legal migrant workers. Employers wary of committing an immigration offence may therefore be denied access to needed skills. This is particularly true for small and medium sized businesses which in Northern Ireland account for 75% of both employment and turnover in the private sector².
5. Likewise, the pace of change in immigration legislation contributes to an environment of uncertainty both for employers and for migrants. With migrants unsure of how their rights and entitlements within the UK might be affected in relation to the EU referendum result, employers have already experienced difficulties in meeting recruitment requirements³.

¹ http://www.migrationni.org/databasedocs/doc_1773395__nism_response_mac_tier_2_review_july_2015.pdf

² <http://www.fsb.org.uk/docs/default-source/Publications/the-contribution-of-small-businesses-to-northern-ireland.pdf?sfvrsn=0>

³ <http://www.agencycentral.co.uk/articles/2016-11/how-brexit-is-affecting-recruitment.htm>

- **What are the benefits and problems with different kinds and levels of migration, for the economy and society?**

1. Migrants help to address the skills gap which exists in Northern Ireland and which is wider than in other parts of the UK. The Northern Ireland Skills Barometer presents evidence of a projected continuing undersupply of skills as the economy grows and gives equal weight to the role of both education and migration in meeting these skills shortages⁴.
2. Statistics relating to use of services by migrants have limited value in an analysis of benefits and problems of migration. As an example, the proportion of children born in Northern Ireland whose mother was born outside the UK or Ireland has risen from 3% in 2001 to just over 10%. While this can be interpreted as primarily representing an additional strain on healthcare resources, it can equally be seen as a welcome population boost to councils which are contending with shrinking and aging populations. And it must also be considered in the context of the net economic benefit that migration has brought to Northern Ireland⁵.
3. A possibly unique consideration for Northern Ireland is the impact that migration has had on the issue of identity politics in the region, described in the Racial Equality Strategy as the ‘genuinely leavening effect in increasing diversity in our society and moving us beyond the traditional “two communities” model’⁶. This increased diversity has undoubtedly brought challenges as well as benefits and there is a recognised intersectionality between sectarianism and racism which has contributed to the well documented rise in racially motivated hate crime.
4. It can be argued that current political discourse and media commentary around migration has helped to fuel a narrative where migration is at the root of many of the social and economic difficulties felt by communities. Such discourse focuses discussions on the benefits and challenges of migration, encouraging argument and counterargument and further polarising the debate. As long as migration is viewed primarily as an economic policy tool with social and cultural impacts which can be managed through carefully crafted regulations and a focus on the net migration target, this discourse is unlikely to change. It

⁴ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/ni-skills-barometer>

⁵ <http://www.uniteagainsthate.org.uk/?p=1004>

⁶ <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/racial-equality-strategy-2015-2025.pdf>

would be more helpful if the long term integration of migrants was integral to the migration discourse and planned for accordingly.

- **What approach should be taken to EU migration as part of the Brexit negotiations – for example, points-based systems, or work permits; and geographical variations?**

1. The overwhelming majority of migrant workers in Northern Ireland are from the EU. In the year ending Dec 2016, 85% of national insurance numbers allocated to adult overseas nationals in Northern Ireland were to EU citizens⁷. The approach taken to the labour rights and entitlements of EU workers will be crucial to the Northern Ireland economy particularly at this time where the priority of the Executive has been to grow the historically weaker private sector.
2. Any approach must ensure that employers in Northern Ireland can compete on an equal playing field to those based in more prosperous areas of the UK. As explained above, NI employers who have recruited through the Tier 2 route have lost employees to other regions of the UK due to their inability to pay the salary increments required to retain their workers. The approach must also ensure that smaller businesses do not lose out due to lack of capacity in administering a complex recruitment process. SMEs and the self-employed provide 75% of employment and 81% of GVA in NI's private sector.⁸
3. Currently the Migration Advisory Committee provides advice to government on migration issues and is, therefore, the non-departmental organization with the most direct influence over immigration policy. Much of its research, however, while promoted as a UK-wide analysis, fails to adequately represent the needs of Northern Ireland. To cite just one example, the Migration Advisory Committee 2013 report on assessing the impact of closing the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS) and the Sector Based Scheme (SBS), advised on closing the latter. In the report it was stated that 40% of firms using the SBS were located in Northern Ireland and yet in the list of 70 companies/organisations listed as visited and 52 pieces of evidence received from companies/organisations which informed this report and its recommendations, not one was located in Northern Ireland. Of further

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-insurance-number-allocations-to-adult-overseas-nationals-to-december-2016>

⁸ <https://www.fsb.org.uk/docs/default-source/Publications/the-contribution-of-small-businesses-to-northern-ireland.pdf?sfvrsn=1>

note is that the list did include the Scottish government, the National Farmers Union of Scotland, several Scottish farms as well as numerous English stakeholders, including a local English council (Herefordshire). While it is impossible to say whether Northern Ireland employers were adversely affected by this decision, it does seem that there was inadequate consideration given to the region. It is crucial, therefore, that Northern Ireland considerations must be given due weight with regard to the development of a migration framework for EU citizens to the UK.

- **What steps should be taken to manage the impact of migration in communities?**

1. The impact of migration has to date been framed and measured primarily in economic terms with less rigorous consideration given to the impact on communities. The first step therefore should be to determine exactly how communities have been impacted by migration. Because communities are experienced primarily at the most local level, any assessment should therefore be carried out at this level. This could most usefully be done in close collaboration with local authorities. The management of impact will therefore vary according to the needs of each community.

- **Is it possible to build greater consensus behind immigration policy? What steps would be needed to do so?**

1. The efforts of this inquiry to begin a ‘national conversation’ on immigration is a good starting point in building consensus. Consensus, however, is only useful if it is based on evidence and therefore this national conversation must be considered alongside available evidence. Evidence of impact must be made more accessible, and used more consistently to challenge the negative discourse around migration which is frequently found in much of the mainstream media.
2. A more regional approach to the management of migration will allow for consensus building, with local communities and employers more able to inform the immigration policies for their area.

- **How should trade-offs between immigration policy and economic policy be handled?**

1. As economic policy is a devolved matter, any trade-offs must be discussed and determined in close collaboration with the devolved administrations.