

Migrant Workers Your Questions Answered

The Humber area has a long history of migration. Recently there has been a rise in migration to the area, in line with the country as a whole, because more people from overseas are coming here to find work. Many local employers now rely on migrant workers to keep their businesses going, particularly in labour intensive industries where migrant workers are plugging the gaps due to a shortage of local workers.

What is a migrant worker?

Migrant workers are people who are in paid employment outside of their own country. This includes those who may move temporarily to find work, for instance during agricultural seasons. Migrants tend to be highly mobile, many return home for regular visits or intend to return home permanently. A migrant worker who becomes permanently settled in a new location could then be called an immigrant. This is a term used to describe more permanent settlement. This term can be applied to British people who choose to live in other countries such as Spain and Australia.

Migrant workers should not be confused with illegal immigrants who are people from outside the European Union (EU) who do not have permission to live here or who break the conditions of their visa or work permit, including staying longer than they are allowed to.

Migrant workers should also not be confused with asylum seekers, who have made a formal application for asylum due to alleged persecution in their own country. Until such time as a decision is reached they are not permitted to work in this country. An asylum seeker who is granted asylum becomes a refugee and they are therefore allowed to live and work in Britain.

Where have the migrant workers come from?

A few years ago most people coming to Britain came from India, Pakistan, South Africa, Australia, China and countries within the European Union (EU) such as Germany and France. Citizens of most European countries, which are part of the EU, have the right to work in Britain, just as British citizens have the right to live and work in other EU countries.

In May 2004, the EU expanded to include 10 additional countries, these were Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Malta and Cyprus. Citizens from these countries, excluding Malta and Cyprus, are known as the 'Accession 8' or 'A8' countries (people from Malta and Cyprus are treated as existing EU countries). The Government allowed people from these countries to work in Britain, in line with the rights allowed to people from existing EU countries, thereby allowing many more people to access job opportunities in Britain.

Unlike citizens from existing EU countries, migrant workers from the A8 countries are required to register on the Home Office Worker Registration Scheme, unless they are self-employed. In January 2007, Bulgaria and Romania also joined the EU, although, their rights to work in Britain are more limited than citizens from other EU countries. Nationals from countries outside of the EU are usually required to apply for a visa or work permit in order to legally work in Britain.

Why have migrant workers come to this country?

Britain has a history of immigration and migration, often from countries within the Commonwealth; partly due to its past as a colonial nation. The UK economy is buoyant and unemployment is relatively low, providing numerous economic opportunities to foreign born workers.

Due to high unemployment and low wages in their own country migrant workers will look for work in countries where there are jobs available such as Britain. Migrant workers frequently fill jobs here that are low skilled or temporary, for instance seasonal agricultural work. This can mean that people with substantial skills and qualifications, such as teachers and accountants, can earn more money carrying out low skilled manual work in Britain.

Some migrants work here for a few months and then return to their own country, particularly when employed in seasonal work, others may move here with their family and stay longer. Some come to earn money for their families at home or to get work experience and/or language skills here, which will help them get a job when they return home. Some arrive here on a formal programme for a specific period of time as part of a gap year whilst at university. Others come for the experience of living abroad, like British students who may travel before coming home to study or find work.

Why have migrant workers come to this area?

In 2003 employers in Yorkshire and Humberside reported greater skills shortages than employers anywhere else in the country. Migrant workers generally move to areas where there are opportunities for lower skilled work, plentiful and cheap private rented accommodation and good transport links between home and work. Migrant workers tend to be willing to travel long distances to work so may live in one area and travel to work in another.

Migrant labour is making a significant contribution to the Humber economy, filling vacancies in agriculture, horticulture, food processing and packing, construction and manufacturing as well as filling higher skilled jobs in sectors such as engineering and health. Frequently employers report that where they are recruiting labour from overseas they have no option to source this labour locally.

How many migrant workers live here?

It is not known how many migrant workers live or work in the area. The main ways of counting migrant workers are, the numbers of applications from foreign nationals for national insurance numbers and the numbers of workers, from the A8 countries, registering on the Workers Registration Scheme. However, neither of these measures count people who return home.

Why do employers recruit people from abroad?

The UK has an ageing population and so migrant workers are needed to ensure there is a sufficient workforce to fill the available jobs. The numbers of people of working age is set to fall, as the baby boomers move into retirement and are replaced by the smaller numbers of people born in each year, since the 1960s. In mid-2005 the average age in Britain was 38.8 years, an increase on 1971 when it was 34.1 years. The ageing population is the result of declines in birth rates and the fact that people are living longer.

Migrant workers are often willing to take jobs which the local population regard as too low paid, such as agricultural and food processing work. Migrants, like other workers, pay income tax, VAT, council tax and national insurance. However, as they tend to be young, and therefore healthy, and only a few have dependents, their use of public services is proportionately less than the amount they contribute financially.

The UK also has a growing population and this growth has been faster in recent years. Until the mid-1990s, birth and death rates were the main driver of population growth. Since the late 1990s, migration into the UK from abroad has been a key factor in population change. The UK has experienced increasing levels of both inward and outward migration in recent years.

In 2005, the most recent year with full data, 380,000 people left the UK and 565,000 entered the country. On a national scale, such population movements remain relatively marginal. The net inflow of 185,000 in 2005 is just 0.3% of the total UK population. But at a local level, migration can have more diverse impacts. Especially when it takes place for the first time, or occurs suddenly and rapidly in an area, the population change may be much more significant than the net 0.3% national change.

For some employers, the problem is finding people with the necessary skills, but for those recruiting to some low skilled and low paid jobs, the problem has been finding enough people to do the work. So when some employers cannot fill vacancies with local people they take on migrant workers, and in some cases, actively recruit from abroad.

Employing migrant workers has, in some cases, allowed businesses to increase their output and workforce. There is no evidence to suggest that the employment of migrant workers has affected either unemployment or wage levels for local people. So this could mean that the numbers of people in work could increase whilst the numbers out of work does not fall.

Figures released from the Government in Spring 2007 revealed that since the same period in 2006:

- The numbers of people claiming out of work benefits are falling.
- The numbers of people in employment is rising.
- The number of job vacancies are also rising.

Many employers report migrant workers being hard working, reliable and motivated. Unfortunately a minority of employers do not promote the welfare of migrant workers and can exploit them by, failing to provide contracts of employment or payslips, failing to pay the minimum wage or making excessive deductions for transport or accommodation.

For many workers their time spent in Britain and in the Humber area can be very positive and enjoyable. However, for other migrant workers the experience can be less positive, as they can suffer exploitation from unscrupulous employers and landlords. Employers can play their part in promoting cohesion between different nationalities within their workforces including supporting migrant workers to learn English.

What rights do migrant workers have when they are here?

Migrant workers have the same rights in employment as British people and so are entitled to:

- A written contract
- The national minimum wage
- Fair and legal deductions from wage slip
- 4 weeks paid holiday
- A safe working environment

Migrant workers from EU countries, other than the A8 countries, are entitled to apply for social security benefits whilst living in Britain. Workers from the A8 countries have to be in continuous employment for at least 12 months, before they are entitled to apply for any social security benefits or housing assistance. Migrant workers, from non-EU countries, who are here on work permits are generally not entitled to such benefits.

How do migrant workers affect me?

Many public services rely on migrant workers to fill both highly skilled and low skilled jobs which could not otherwise be filled, for instance the health service rely on doctors and nurses from overseas and migrant workers are also taking on jobs as bus drivers and care assistants.

There are many benefits to the British economy from employing workers from other countries. It is estimated that many millions of pounds are contributed to the UK economy by European migrant workers alone, above what they claim in public services. The Bank of England has suggested that migration helps to control inflation and that the cost of borrowing money would be higher without migration.

Migrant workers also add to the culture and diversity of society, enriching life in Britain for everyone. Migrant workers should be welcomed and their integration into communities supported, making their stay in this country, and the Humber area in particular, as positive an experience as possible.

How can I welcome and support migrant workers?

Welcome new neighbours to the community or street when they move in, let them know what day the bins are emptied and find out if there is any other information they need to know. You can also welcome any new work colleagues from overseas as well as volunteer at schools, churches and social groups which support new communities. Language can be a barrier to integration but many migrant workers already speak excellent English whilst others are learning to speak English.

If other people are complaining about migrant workers being here, tell them about the advantages they bring to the area in terms of the economy and culture.

What are the challenges for councils and partners?

Many more migrant workers have come to Britain than the Government had anticipated. Although migrant workers bring many benefits to an area, and the country as a whole, longer-term settlement or increases in the numbers of migrant workers could raise a number of issues. This may include potential impacts on jobs, housing markets and public services such as schools as well as impacting on community relations. Services must be able to respond effectively to the needs of migrant workers and the settled community.

The Humber Improvement Partnership, which includes East Riding of Yorkshire Council, Kingston upon Hull City Council, North East Lincolnshire Council, North Lincolnshire Council and Humberside Fire and Rescue Service, are looking at ways to develop a co-ordinated approach to these new residents and workers, to ensure that migrant workers feel part of the community, are supported as necessary and that the local economy can benefit from their skills.

This information has been produced by the Humber Improvement Partnership.

