

**Age and Social Isolation – response to public inquiry by the Equal Opportunities Committee of the Scottish Parliament**

'New' migrants in Scotland and the issue of loneliness

I am currently working as a researcher on a University of Glasgow/University of Swansea research project (funded by the Economic and Social Research Council): *'Experiences of social security and prospects for long-term settlement in Scotland amongst migrants from Central Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Union'* (2013-2017). I have been carrying out research for the purposes of this project in a number of rural locations in Scotland (within Angus) and what has struck me in particular is how common the experience of loneliness is among the new migrant populations, regardless of people's age. The other project researcher working in rural locations within Aberdeenshire has reported very similar issues. Considering the fact that the Scottish Government is planning to reach its population growth target predominantly through migration and is committed to retaining migrants in Scotland, I think this is an important issue.

To provide some background on Central and Eastern European (henceforth CEE) migrants' settlement in Scotland:

- the overwhelming majority arrive as economic migrants, i.e. to seek work; others come to join family members who are already established in Scotland
- since looking for work opportunities is the key factor behind migration, CEE migrants tend to settle where work opportunities arise; therefore, they are a highly dispersed community, arriving to various locations across Scotland (and the UK), both urban and rural, rather than clustering in given regions/locations
- some migrants arrive independently, others through recruitment agencies and others through networks of family/friends/acquaintances
- some migrants arrive with their families or bring their families over at some stage when they become more established in the country (e.g. through gaining permanent employment), others arrive as individuals.

The key reasons behind the experience of loneliness among 'new' CEE migrants are the following:

- being away from family (in the case of those arriving as individuals) and/or established circle of friends;
- being highly isolated at work and/or home (e.g. people who work by themselves rather than in teams; mothers with young children who speak poor English);
- few/no people of the same nationality living in the area;
- barriers to forming ties with other compatriots (e.g. class differences, internal competition for work, lack of trust)
- barriers to forming ties with the established local community, e.g.:
  - o language barrier – not being able to communicate freely in English (in some cases, lack of knowledge of English altogether, and lack of language learning provision or limited opportunities to take up language learning due to pressures of work and/or care obligations);

- cultural barrier - not knowing how to go about approaching people and forming new friendships in the new location; having different customs and/or interests than members of the local community;
- lack of opportunities to form ties with the established community (especially if limited knowledge of English and the migrant works/lives with other migrants) – e.g. in some rural areas there is a lack of public places where people new to the area could meet socially with members of the established community;
- local communities not being open to establishing closer ties with the newcomers.

CEE migrants moving to Scotland hence face a number of challenges in forming social ties (and hence combatting loneliness) in their new country.

There seems to be a common misconception that new migrants from CEE receive a lot of mutual support within their own communities (as we have heard e.g. from representatives of local authorities). However, this may not necessarily be the case, at least not within all the CEE populations. Our (and other, c.f. Eade *et al.* 2006, Ryan *et al.* 2008, Torunczyk-Ruiz 2010) research indicates that e.g. members of the largest CEE ‘community’, the Polish community, frequently demonstrate a certain degree of lack of trust towards other Poles. Hence, in the case of the Polish community, there is a tendency to form small tight knit networks of mutual support (e.g. between 2-3 families) rather than wide-ranging support which would be extended to all members of the ‘community’. Therefore, even within the largest CEE ‘community’ in Scotland many people suffer loneliness as they might not speak sufficient English to establish contacts with local people but at the same time might not be able to form ties within their own ethnic community. In consequence, such migrants have limited opportunities for establishing new friendships and breaking out of social isolation.

#### Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

Though newcomers to Scotland may suffer loneliness regardless of the location they have moved to, it seems to be a particularly acute problem for new migrants moving into rural areas of Scotland. Larger Scottish cities, such as Glasgow, Aberdeen or Edinburgh, offer more opportunities for forming ties both within ethnic communities and with the established population. Especially with the more established migrant communities (e.g. the Polish), there are a number of institutions which facilitate establishing links with other people (e.g. the church, the Polish Saturday school). There are also more charities and NGOs working towards this goal (e.g. The Welcoming Association in Edinburgh) as well as migrant-led initiatives, e.g. local facebook pages or websites for various nationals living in the UK.

In rural areas, however, migrants are often dependent on their own resources for establishing contacts with other people and forming social ties. This is not an easy task and some migrants living in rural areas are very much isolated and lonely, especially if they have insufficient language skills to communicate with people around them. In rural-remote areas there is often a lack of places (outside workplaces) where people could establish contacts with others.

In general, regardless of location, loneliness might be a bigger problem for adult migrants than for their children. School-age children are naturally more integrated through being in a group of (English speaking) peers on a daily basis. Many children who arrive in/start school in Scotland without

(sufficient) knowledge of English suffer high degrees of isolation initially but with time usually manage to acquire the language and form friendships within the school environment. However, this is not the case with adult migrants most of whom are not 'thrown' into a supportive English-language environment. Quite the opposite, adult migrants are often to a certain degree segregated through their work environment, which in many cases consists of co-nationals or other migrants and provides little opportunity for learning English and/or forming ties with people from the local community. There are also adult migrants of pensionable age who are brought over to Scotland by their children either because they require care themselves or because they become carers for their grandchildren. Such older CEE migrants, who typically do not speak English, are also often very lonely as their social ties are largely limited to their close family, who may be extremely busy with work in relatively low-paid jobs often involving long and/or unsociable hours.

Nevertheless, our attention has also been drawn (through the work of Feniks, an Edinburgh-based NGO offering psychological support to CEE migrants) to the issue of loneliness among Polish children who are undergoing the situation of family break-up. Their parents are often the only family these children have in Scotland and when relationship between parents dissolves, the children have no one to turn to and share their feelings with. Moreover, despite high levels of competency in English, they often lack the ability to speak about negative emotions in English.

#### Impacts of social isolation

Typical impacts of social isolation in the case of migrants are:

- low mood, depression, higher suicide rates (as established by Feniks);
- addiction to alcohol and/or drugs
- family break-up.

#### Best practices

In terms of best practices, the following are highly recommendable:

- ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes – these not only provide migrants with the opportunity to learn English but also to learn more about the receiving society, meet people from the local community (teachers and volunteers who are helping them) and – perhaps most importantly – a space where they can get to know other like-minded people and establish contacts. Nevertheless, ESOL classes are not accessible for many migrants due to their working patterns and the scarcity of the provision in many areas;
- buddying scheme – Neil Paterson from Angus Council ([PatersonN@angus.gcsx.gov.uk](mailto:PatersonN@angus.gcsx.gov.uk)) is currently working towards establishing a scheme where volunteers from the local community would spend a couple of hours per week with a newcomer (non-native English speaker). The idea is to help newcomers practice their English in a real-life context with a friendly person, to support them in communicating with local services if need be, to show them around the area and facilitate establishing links with people from the local community;
- **Welcoming Association** (<http://www.thewelcoming.org/>) – this is an Edinburgh-based charity which is helping newcomers get to know their new environment and settle in. Originally based on a buddy-scheme idea similar to the one mentioned above, the Association has expanded its activities:

*'The Welcoming Association brings together refugees, asylum seekers and people from Scottish and local minority ethnic communities. The aim is to welcome newcomers, learn together and improve English language and literacy skills. The project supports new migrants to get to know the local culture through outings, music, drama, visual arts and talks. There are visits from service providers in law, housing, employment and education.'*

All the above initiatives play a very important role in combatting loneliness among new migrants and it would be worth looking into these initiatives and

I and other members of our project team, as well as a number of organisations working towards migrant integration in Scotland will be happy to provide any further details that the Scottish Government might require in looking into the matter of loneliness among newcomers to Scotland.

We sincerely hope that the Scottish Government is going to take this issue into consideration.

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