



MIGRANTS AND EMPLOYMENT IN ABERDEEN/SHIRE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is part of a 2017 series of papers related to migration in Aberdeen/shire, encompassing healthcare, education, language learning, employment, and housing. It is based on wider research findings from interviews with over 200 migrants and 60 experts across Scotland, with a special focus on our work in Aberdeen City and rural Aberdeenshire.

The findings draw on interviews with an ethnically and nationally diverse cohort of migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (as detailed in the below table). As well as housing, migrants were asked about a range of topics including: their reasons for settling in Scotland; their experience of local services (from healthcare, to education, to libraries); their working life; their experiences of welfare provision; their families; and their social lives.



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OVERVIEW OF SSAMIS RESEARCH

Locations	Aberdeen (n27); Glasgow (n37); Peterhead (n41), Fraserburgh (n9), other rural locations in Aberdeenshire (n25); Arbroath (n39), Montrose (n12), Brechin (n9), other rural locations in Angus (n8)
Employment sectors	beauty and hairdressing; care industry; cleaning services; hospitality & catering; construction; farm work; food processing; interpreting/translation; IT; office work; oil industry; retail; third sector
Employment status	Agency workers; employees; professionals; self-employed; stay-at-home parents; students; unemployed
Gender	Women (n129); men (n78)
Age group	18-24 (n13); 25-34 (n66); 35-49 (n91); 50+ (n36); unknown (n1)
Country of origin	Azerbaijan (n2); Bulgaria (n8); Czech Republic (n6); Estonia (n1); Hungary (n18); Kazakhstan (n1); Kyrgyzstan (n1); Latvia (n42); Lithuania (n28); Poland (n83); Romania (n5); Russia (n5); Slovakia (n4); Ukraine (n3)

INTRODUCTION

SSAMIS research found that **the availability of jobs was a key motivating factor for CEE migrants coming to Scotland**. However, it is important to note that it was only one (albeit significant) factor in leading migrants to settle in Aberdeen/shire: family, lifestyle, long-term security and welfare support were also important motivators in long-term settlement. Although stable employment was favoured in the long-term, for many newly-arrived migrants the initial priority had been to secure work as soon as possible. The majority continued to work in the low-skilled, low-paid sectors where they had first found work, even several years after arriving in Scotland. However, many migrants discussed the **insecurity of low-skilled, low-paid work**.

In Aberdeen/shire, **migrants were chiefly concentrated in the fish industry and in agriculture**. Other significant types of employment can be seen in the table above (e.g. care, hospitality). A subset of interviewees, who had usually been in Scotland for over five years, were self-employed or owned small businesses. Very few individuals we interviewed were unemployed – this may be partly because those who did face difficulties finding stable employment in the longer term tended to consider moving back to their country of origin, or to a different EU country.

Below, we consider different aspects of employment as experienced by migrants in Aberdeen/shire and provide examples from SSAMIS research.

FINDING WORK AND DEALING WITH UNEMPLOYMENT

- There were three main ways migrants found work: through **agencies** (either whilst still in their country of origin or after arriving in Scotland); through **existing social networks** in North East Scotland; or, less often, through **local resources** (from websites to Job Centre Plus).
- Migrants had mixed experiences with Job Centre Plus, though most only used their services if absolutely necessary. Some were confident users, others described them as offering little help and preferred to find work in other ways.

I understand that they're doing good work, but [the Job Centre] do not help you to find a job. They're always pressurising you – oh, where is your job? Why aren't you working for such a long time? Maybe you need to think about a housekeeping job, about a waitress job? But I am a chemist and I wanted to have my job, which I do love, you know? So from one side, yes, I had huge support. From the other side, unfortunately the government doesn't have any programs to help jobseekers get back on track.

Olga, 39, Lithuanian, waste management worker

- Individuals could be forced to move around Scotland or even the UK as seasonal work changed; indeed, several Aberdeen/shire workers we spoke to had started off in agriculture or hospitality in England before moving north.

CASE STUDY

Nina, a 59-year-old Lithuanian woman, first arrived in Scotland in 2004. She travelled straight to Peterhead, where she had acquaintances that were able to help her settle and find shift work in a fish factory.

She stayed for ten months, went back to Lithuania for another six months, then returned to Scotland in 2005 to work in another fish factory. After becoming unemployed as seasonal work in the fish factories dried up, her agency found her a job on berry farms near Dundee. Due to difficult working conditions, she once more tried to get fish factory work in Aberdeenshire. However, she was considered a 'turncoat' and struggled to find work in the same factory, but did eventually find another fish factory job as a night shift supervisor. For her periods of unemployment, she did not claim any welfare as she was unaware of what she was entitled to.

Although she then worked in the same factory for over eight years, because this was through an agency, she did not receive the wages, pension or rights of a directly-employed worker. At one point, she was sacked for taking too much holiday. After some advice from a local expert and a lawyer, she joined a trade union and got her job back. However, following a bad fishing season in 2015 when she was only being offered a few hours of work a week, she was struggling financially and was considering returning to Lithuania.

DESKILLING AND OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY

- **Occupational mobility** was one of the most significant issues faced by migrants. Many were overqualified for the low-skilled roles they took on, but generally arrived in Scotland on the understanding that they would be doing this kind of work.
- Although many were reasonably happy to have stable employment and did not particularly aim for higher-skilled or higher-waged work, this could have negative emotional effects for

others: especially migrants staying long-term who wished to find work more suited to their education, skills or previous experience. Low English language skills, and the lack of opportunities/time to improve them, significantly contributed towards this **deskilling**.

My husband doesn't like it here: he's not working in his own specialism, he works at the fish factory, which he doesn't enjoy at all. He used to work as a car mechanic. He did look for work as a mechanic here, [including] where there's another Russian mechanic, but there were no jobs. He went to [the next town] but there wasn't anything available with the Latvian mechanic there either. It is hard when you don't speak the language, the only place for you is the factory.

Danute, 47, Lithuanian, fish factory worker

- It could also be related to a **lack of varied jobs and industries in rural areas**, or a lack of time and money generally.

[I want] to get more qualifications [that you do] when you're working. You can get these two day courses I think... that's my plan for the future as well. I want to do a chainsaw course, that's the next thing. [...] [My boss] gave me the forklift driving licence to do as well. [...] I cannae go to college right now because I've insurance [to pay], I've got a house... I need to work just now. I'm just trying to get on these two day courses you can do and pass it. You have to pay a lot for it, but that's my plan – get as many skills as I can – like chainsaw and maybe rigging... survival courses for offshore...

Karlis, 19, Latvian, agricultural worker

- One way migrants were able to improve their job satisfaction was to **become self-employed** in sectors such as construction, mechanics, interpreting, cake decorating, or beauty and hairdressing. Others gained experience via **volunteering**, which led to better local knowledge and social networks, which in turn improved occupational mobility.
- However, some local sectors, such as the oil industry, could be difficult to access due to migrants' lack of local networks and industry contacts.
- Many migrants ended up in the situation of **only speaking Polish or Russian at work** (generally due to the majority of co-workers being migrants with a similarly low level of English, and a lack of language-learning opportunities locally). This could lead to a vicious cycle whereby migrants had little chance to improve their English language.

CASE STUDY

Ada was a 36 year old Polish woman who had lived in Aberdeenshire for nine years, working in a physically taxing role in a fish factory. She lived with her husband, two young children and her disabled mother. She had very few opportunities to speak English at work:

Sometimes I speak a few sentences with my manger, sometimes with a young person, 'How are you? - I'm fine.' That's all. We can't speak at work. We just stay and we work. We can't speak. I have only a fifteen minute break - I [have a] drink, [go to the] toilet and [smoke] cigarettes – that's all, that's all! [laughs]

Due to this, Ada struggled to communicate in her local community, leading to problems at her children's school, where she had struggled to convey that she did not give permission for her child to receive a particular immunisation, and with benefits – due to a misunderstanding, for several years she was unable to receive any allowance for her mother's disability. However, after attending one-to-one ESOL lessons provided by the local authority, she was able to improve her spoken English and thus secure a job in the care sector, where she had been hoping to work for several years prior.

- However, there were examples of migrants working long-term in smaller businesses or on farms, where they were able to interact more with Scottish locals and benefit from this in terms of language. Some migrants chose to change sectors in order to improve their English.
- For some demographics, particularly middle-aged women, it is important to note that moving to Scotland offered much better opportunities than were available in their country of origin. They spoke about feeling greater security in being able to earn decent wages for the last 10-15 years of their working life up to pensionable age, for example.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH EMPLOYERS

- **Employer relationships were key to job satisfaction.** Where employers helped newly arrived migrants to find accommodation, gain worker registration or with other necessary processes, those migrants tended to feel more secure in Aberdeen/shire. As they became more established, migrants might be less in need of direct assistance, but still greatly appreciated employers who were able to be flexible: for example, in relation to their need for extended leave for trips home, in providing support for language learning, or simply in offering stable employment where they felt that their rights were respected and their contributions recognised.

CASE STUDY

Madara, a 38-year-old Latvian woman, came to Aberdeenshire to work on a farm after working in bad conditions picking berries and cleaning hotel rooms in the south of England. In early pregnancy, she travelled north with her partner and her sister Dita - all three were seeking work after experiencing a traumatic period of homelessness.

Madara initially hid the fact that she was pregnant from the farm manager. However, upon finding out, her employers were very supportive and helped the family to find suitable accommodation and arrange healthcare for Madara's pregnancy. In time, Madara's teenage son (who had stayed behind in Latvia) came to join them and work on the farm. Dita's two adult daughters and two grandchildren also moved to the area. The help they received from their employers enabled them to establish a sense of security in a local, rural area after a difficult early period as migrants in the UK.

- However, migrants could also be vulnerable to **harmful or illegal employer practices**. Long-term agency work and zero-hours contracts (e.g. in fish processing or parcel delivery) put some at a disadvantage in terms of job security. In common with other 'precarious' workers in the UK, they were subject to wider issues linked to informal employment contracts such as only being told their hours at short notice, or being unable to make long-term plans due to a lack of reliable income. This was often especially relevant to new arrivals, and for those with lower levels of English. Difficulties faced included: not receiving full pay from employment agencies; not understanding contracts they had signed; or not having knowledge of rights such as paid leave. Migrants could also be reluctant to take up certain rights for fear of losing their jobs
- In one example, an employment tribunal eventually awarded damages for racial harassment to a Polish employee who had been unfairly dismissed: they had been caught speaking Polish after their employer had tried to ban non-English languages in the workplace, despite the fact that the managers had hired mainly non-English speaking workers.
- The Aberdeenshire fishing industry in particular could be dangerous – we came across several migrants who had lost family or friends working on boats or in factories. Employers did not always follow health and safety procedures (e.g. on keeping a room well ventilated during the use of strong chemicals for cleaning).
- Fish factory work could cause chronic health issues such as skin conditions or repetitive strain injuries, and some people found the atmosphere in fish processing factories oppressive.

I had blood running from cuts in my hands, you had to fillet the fish so fast. [...] A woman came up to me to help a bit, she said "do it like this". She started to explain how to do it another way, but then another woman, a Scottish woman, started to shout at us – "no chatting, you're at work!" That highlights what kind of rights you had.

Anastasia, 38, Latvian/Lithuanian, former fish factory worker

RELATIONSHIPS WITH COWORKERS

- Migrants gave many examples of **positive relationships with co-workers** who, in typical migrant sectors, tended to be other migrants. Such relationships could help them build local networks and give them a better safety net and help with things such as finding housing or understanding the welfare system.
- **Inter-nationality migrant group tensions** were also mentioned by many migrants: for example, some perceived that supervisors of a different nationality would treat their co-nationals more favourably.
- Although some settled migrants formed strong friendships with Scottish colleagues, it was relatively rare for migrants to socialise with Scottish co-workers. This was due to language barriers or simply a lack of Scottish workers in typical migrant industries.

OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Employers can play a significant role in creating positive experiences of settlement in Aberdeen/shire.** This is not just in providing a safe and pleasant working environment, but via varying levels of pastoral support for workers: from helping migrants with necessary paperwork, to explaining local norms and conditions around housing, to being sympathetic towards requests for flexibility to attend ESOL lessons or meet childcare commitments, for example.
- **English language skills are one of the most important means for migrants to overcome deskilling and achieve greater occupational mobility.** The availability of classes at different times of day, of different levels, and where children are also welcome, can help individuals improve their work prospects and integrate more fully into the local community.
- More awareness could be created of **volunteering** as a means of gaining new skills (including language skills) and improving occupational mobility.
- However, it should also be recognised that some migrants are content to stay in lower skilled industries, and emphasis should be put on working conditions, fairer contracts, and making migrants aware of their rights as workers.
- Migrants setting up their own businesses were largely unaware of the help available to them (e.g. Business Gateway) – more **outreach work from these agencies, and** providing resources in different relevant local languages such as Polish and Russian, would benefit them and the local economy.