



Experiences of Welfare within Glasgow's Central & East European (CEE) Community

Briefing for the Green MSPs based on findings from
the SSAMIS research project

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About the Author

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Background

Drawing on findings from the 5-year¹ ESRC funded² [Social Support and Migration in Scotland \(SSAMIS\)](#) project, this briefing paper explores experiences of and attitudes towards benefit entitlement and accessing welfare amongst Glasgow's CEE community³.

Central & Eastern Europe (CEE) has become one of the principal source regions of migration to Scotland in recent years. Most recent available [data](#) for Scotland records 102,000 'White Other' inhabitants, many of whom are CEE migrants - for example, this data shows 61,000 'White Polish' people resident in Scotland. The population of Glasgow includes 22,938 'White Other' inhabitants, with Poles constituting the largest national group.⁴

There are many misconceptions surrounding CEE migration to the UK, amongst both migrants and UK citizens, and misunderstandings of migrant benefit entitlement and access to welfare is common. The fact many CEE migrants are entitled to, and that some do, access welfare services is a politically charged topic - migrants have often been portrayed as '[benefit scroungers](#)', who are simultaneously '[taking jobs away from native workers](#)'. Neither of these claims is based on clear factual evidence.

UK-wide Welfare Reform is shaping how services are experienced by and meeting the needs of different sectors of the Scottish population. During this period of change, migrant perspectives have been largely absent from the debate - the Scottish Government's recently announced [Social Security Experience Panels](#) offer an important opportunity to begin remedying this.

As well as exploring CEE migrant experiences of welfare, this paper outlines the main challenges faced by service providers in providing appropriate support for the diverse needs of Glasgow's CEE migrant community. It includes some examples of good practice and informal strategies that can be instrumental in helping migrants find out more about, and access, locally available support.

Migrants often need, and are entitled to, support from social security services like anyone else. Many migrants we spoke with had children and other dependents, and were struggling to find work that paid sufficient wages and which offered any

¹ This ESRC-funded research project is a collaboration between the University of Glasgow and the University of Swansea. It began in November 2013 and will run until November 2018. Fieldwork was conducted February 2014 – December 2015. For further information please see the project website: <http://www.gla.ac.uk/research/az/gramnet/research/ssamis/>.

² ESRC listing Grant no ES/J007374/1

³ SSAMIS researchers conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with over two hundred CEE migrants and over sixty representatives of local authorities, service providers, and migrant associations across four sites: Glasgow (n37), Aberdeen (n27), and towns and villages in the Aberdeenshire (n75) and Angus (n68) areas.

⁴ Whilst the majority of SSAMIS interviewees in Glasgow were Polish (n17), other participant countries of origin include; Azerbaijan (n1); Czech Republic (n4); Hungary (n2); Kazakhstan (n1); Lithuania (n7); Romania (n1); Slovakia (n3); Ukraine (n1)

prospect of career progression. This was compounded by rising costs of living, strict conditions around training (like ESOL classes) whilst claiming benefits, and a social security system that they felt was stacked against them. In addition, many migrants are not even aware of their entitlements. The migrants who

participated in this research experienced similar problems to those reported by UK citizens claiming welfare, but these were exacerbated by language difficulties, cultural misunderstandings, institutional barriers and a perception by some migrants that they were being discriminated against.

Participant Overview

Within Glasgow, researchers worked in Govan (Southside) and Tollcross (East End), both areas characterised by high levels of social deprivation and places where relatively high numbers of CEE migrants live.

The majority of participants arrived as economic migrants, i.e. to seek work; others joined family members already established in Scotland.

Welfare was not a key factor behind participants' decision to relocate to the UK. In comparison to their countries of origin, they felt the UK offered better employment opportunities, higher wages, and greater economic stability.

Participants talked about migrant groups as diverse communities dispersed across various locations in Scotland (and the UK), rather than as homogenous groups of co-nationals clustering in specific locations.

Key Findings

Information about services

A lot of our participants said that their experience of the benefit system was characterised by lack of information, limited awareness of their entitlements and a general anxiety about engaging with welfare and support services. They

also expressed gratitude for the wide-variety of advice services available in Glasgow. Advice service providers reported difficulties connecting with some migrant groups.

Participants exhibited a mixed knowledge of their entitlement to welfare, of which services exist, and how to access them.

It was common for participants to rely on information gained through word of mouth from co-nationals or other CEE migrants, and online communities, to learn about entitlements and how to claim. This information can often be out of date or inaccurate - translated online information could be more reliably maintained.

Participants reported difficulties navigating complex layers of bureaucracy in order to access support from welfare services, compounded by confusing language and technical terminologies used by some providers and in official literature.

Third sector advice services often struggled to 'break into' some migrant communities, and found their work hampered by expectations amongst some migrants that they should not to look for 'outside' support. Some were reliant on internet / social media to advertise advice services and reach out to communities. Migrants were often surprised by the existence of, and their eligibility for, support.

"Whenever I have to go to the Jobcentre or phone the HMRC to clarify something, I feel really sick..."

Mirka, Laundry Worker, Polish

"I suspect that if I was alone here and I would only be working... Work, home, work, home... No one ever informed me that I am eligible for any benefits."

Honorata, Factory Worker, Polish

"We usually help each other to sort things like this [benefit application] communally. We learn something, and then share this information. You are not provided with this information from inside [the system]"

Rima, Factory Worker, Lithuanian

"To be honest, I'm not sure whether I'm entitled ... or not. Whenever you contact the Advice Office, they never tell you that you definitely qualify for something - they are probably afraid that you may get too much..."

Marta, Unemployed, Polish

"There is an internet site, Glasgow organisation, I don't remember exactly the name but you can see everything. About the Glasgow social [security] system, everything online"

Boleslav, Factory Worker, Slovakian

Barriers to accessing welfare and advice services

Despite the existence of many formal support structures (council services, third sector) problems with access were common.

Linguistic and cultural barriers can be intimidating when accessing services.

Opening hours of services do not always fit with the often unsociable work patterns of migrants - many do shift work, and in rural areas many have sometimes intense seasonal working patterns.

Many participants find the benefits system confusing and complex, and have experienced significant difficulties satisfying entitlement criteria. Participants reported repeatedly having documents lost in the system, or finding decision periods on appeals arbitrarily extended. This leads to delays in payments which can lead to crisis situations.

Constant changes in benefit rules, procedures and entitlement presented what were termed as 'serious challenges' to service providers seeking to support migrants.

Lack of flexibility in the benefits system frustrated migrant participants, particularly with regards to limitations on benefit entitlement whilst attending ESOL classes or doing work experience.

Authorities responsible for administering different benefits often had contradictory interpretations of the rules regarding participant entitlement – participants and experts both reported a lack of consistency towards assessing entitlement.

"I was supposed to get Tax Credit but did not get it... because HMRC lost my letter. And they claim all the time that they do not have my letter - the one in which I am asking for a reconsideration ... I applied again, I lost all the money which I was entitled to before - and we talk about £2000. I would call them 'con artists'. It all depends on who receives the letter. The person will either process the application or just ignore (it)".

Mirka, Laundry Worker, Polish

"They didn't award me this allowance ... I was working towards my career, I was doing something with that purpose in mind, I wasn't sitting around [claiming benefits]. However, ESOL is not a course which is considered to help you develop your career"

Lidia, Student, Polish

"Sometimes, I've had occasions where there's not been perhaps a Lithuanian interpreter available, you try the Russian and that's a different dialect. Again it's, I don't know specifically, I can't speak any foreign language, I can't tell you if it's right or wrong. But again, that's just one of the difficulties that we face."

Local authority worker

"If it's not institutional racism then it's stupid bureaucracy which is preventing people from accessing the kind of stuff in time and as they are entitled to".

Third sector worker

Case Study: Advice services filling the gap

One third sector interview participant noticed that many of their CEE clients were being forced to move onto Universal Jobmatch by the DWP. This was unsuitable for many CEE clients who lacked the English, IT and CV writing skills to satisfy the strict requirements of the Universal Jobmatch scheme. In response, the organisation created an initiative designed to boost these clients' employability. However, given strict Universal Jobmatch criteria, rather than helping clients build CV writing and interview skills as originally planned, this initiative ended up using the organisation's limited resources to mitigate unsuitable DWP provision – in the words of the participant, it became an exercise in keeping clients 'off getting sanctioned' as non-compliance was being 'enforced with enthusiasm'.

Frontline staff considered key to welfare access

While participants expressed gratitude for the availability of advice and support services offered in Glasgow, they felt that successful access to benefit entitlements ultimately depended on the abilities and understanding of individual caseworker/advisor – resulting in mixed experiences engaging with frontline staff.

Migrant participants reported instances of local authority, advice charity and NHS staff going above and beyond to help them with their benefit entitlements.

Caseworkers with a cross-cultural awareness and communication skills were most helpful in addressing needs of participants.

Staff who speak Eastern European languages (often drawn from Glasgow's CEE communities themselves) were considered extremely useful - many local authority and third sector participants spoke of wanting to hire more bilingual staff.

Service providers talked about relying on volunteer, rather than paid, translators due to lack of resources.

"You have to 'get into their heads' to get them [job centre staff] to help you"

Daiva, Cleaner, Lithuanian

"I am attending lectures on finance management, accountancy, marketing. Many things to choose from, and they [jobcentre staff] help a lot. If I went there with a new idea now, I am hundred percent sure that they would direct me the right way."

Inga, Photographer, Lithuanian

Some participants felt there was 'institutional discrimination' against them

Migrant and expert participants frequently reported sensing an inbuilt bias against migrant claimants in the system.

There was an overwhelming impression that benefit entitlement decisions for CEE claimants took on average much longer than decisions for UK citizens, with reports of waits as long as 6 months. These 'horrendous delays' applied to all forms of benefit, including in work benefits.

Documents accompanying migrant benefit applications were routinely lost, further delaying benefit payment.

"I was allocated a social worker or caseworker, I'm not sure. However, the woman was terrible ... They offered me a flat with dirty towels, I refused immediately and told them I didn't want it. I needed to buy everything myself because the flat was empty... apart from a cooker. Later I found out I was entitled to a lot of free stuff. They must have been thinking that I was a stupid Polish woman who was not aware of that."

Marta, Unemployed, Polish

'...we get involved with lawyers ... because once the documents had been lost there so I sent new ones, and they were lost again. I was visiting lawyers and there were Slovaks, me, and some Poles there and all of them with lost documents.'

Adela, Cleaner, Czech

"It's strange that it only happens [lost documents] to Polish people."

Mirka, Laundry Worker, Polish

Mixed attitudes towards welfare

Many participants were accessing or had accessed benefits, especially families with children. Others (single people or couples without children) had a more critical view of any welfare use. There was an overwhelmingly negative attitude towards what was perceived as a heavy reliance on, or abuse of, state welfare.

Participants expressed negative attitudes towards welfare abuse and stories of people 'working the system'. This included very negative attitudes towards other migrants 'living off benefits' and 'giving a bad name' to the migrant community as a result. Some participants expressed negative attitudes towards welfare dependence amongst UK citizens.

By and large participants welcomed the provision of state support in the UK, in particular in-work benefits and Maternity Allowance - much of this was due to low earnings.

A minority of participants expressed negative attitudes towards any forms of welfare, perhaps explaining some instances of migrants lacking knowledge of entitlement.

"I did not come here to live on benefits. I came to work, to earn my own money and to start a family ... I hadn't thought of applying for benefits until I got pregnant and became homeless."

Mirka, Laundry Worker, Polish

"I simply never thought of getting welfare. You simply get another job, pay off the debts and live further. I have never encountered welfare."

Tadas, IT Specialist, Lithuanian

Recommendations

- 1. Improving clarity and information dissemination** - the language used across the social security system can be confusing, especially to those who do not use English as their first language. Simplification would assist migrant claimants, and would also help front-line workers, service providers and support agencies to meet diverse migrant needs better. Local services need to be equipped to pro-actively seek out and inform migrants about their rights and entitlements.
- 2. Improving cultural awareness of frontline workers** - engaging with and supporting migrant claimants is not a new development in the Scottish social security system, and an approach which accommodates diverse cultural needs is overdue. This includes tackling the general stigma in the UK associated with accessing welfare - this stigma is held by many within migrant communities, and experienced doubly by many migrant claimants who feel they are perceived as especially 'undeserving'.
- 3. Increased devolution of social security** - the approach of some devolved initiatives has been useful in mitigating otherwise less helpful UK-wide approaches. For example, the Scottish Welfare Fund has been a valuable resource, and further proliferation of support and advice services could be beneficial. Whilst such initiatives are important, they demonstrate that devolved spending is being used to plug gaps in the UK-wide, centrally-funded welfare system. As one NGO interviewee put it, "... in Scotland you've got the tension between Westminster and Holyrood in that what is it actually in Holyrood's power to do. And in terms of social security, that's generally out of their hands." As such, the new [Scottish Social Security Agency](#) is an opportunity to improve migrant experiences of welfare.
- 4. Migrant voices are not being heard, and their needs are not being met** - their perspectives are necessary to develop services and forms of support that meet the diverse and complex needs of migrant claimants across Scotland. The upcoming [Social Security Experience Panels](#) are an opportunity to engage with a client group that is evidently experiencing difficulties accessing the support they are entitled to, so that – in the words of Jeane Freeman MSP – we can 'build and refine a better model... that treat[s] people with fairness, dignity and respect'.
- 5. Payment of the Living Wage** - many migrants' engagement with welfare support services began as a result of low paying work offering no or limited career progression, leading to difficult financial circumstances. The [concentration of CEE migrants in low or semi-skilled work](#) (despite often high educational attainment), and tendency for this work to pay below the Living Wage, is a significant factor in their need for additional financial support from welfare services.

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