

MIGRANTS AND HOUSING IN ABERDEEN/SHIRE

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SSAMIS
Social Support and Migration in Scotland

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 **housing was a significant area of concern for both migrants and service providers**. Although some issues discussed here were migrant-specific, other issues reflect more general problems in Scotland/the UK with regard to local authority housing provision (e.g. long waiting lists) and the private rental sector (e.g. landlords failing to carry out repairs; long-term tenant insecurity).

The negative impact that such issues have can be magnified for migrants due to several factors:

- **Low levels of English** can make it difficult to communicate with landlords, local authorities, or housing associations;
- **A lack of acquired knowledge of the Scottish context** can mean that some individuals are unaware of their rights with regards to housing (e.g. landlord deposit schemes);
- Similarly, migrants may have less knowledge about **where to go for help** (e.g. Citizens' Advice Scotland; Shelter helpline);
- Having smaller social networks locally can mean **less informal support** if migrants face difficult circumstances with their accommodation.

To aid early processes of settlement, significant numbers of research participants stayed with friends or family when first arriving in Scotland, and offered rooms temporarily in return once they were more established. They typically then went on to look for social or private rental housing once they had a job and felt more secure in and familiar with the local area. This was not always successful, however, and there were cases where individuals returned home after several months of looking for suitable work and accommodation. Those subletting rooms were sometimes left with unpaid informal debts from these kinds of situations.

> We arrived to one of his sister's, precisely to their sublet, and they gave us a room where we could stay, live. And the other sister's family helped us a lot with gathering information, because they already knew English. So they could help us go to the council, they showed us the official paperwork, the school, how to deal with what and similar things. They helped us translate, fill out the paperwork, everything
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> **Judit, 40, Hungarian, caterer**

> We didn't come to 'virgin territory': there were people who fed us, gave us a place to stay, and looked after us - made sure we got settled in.
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> **Nina, 59, Lithuanian, fish factory worker**

Migrants had mixed experiences with neighbours: fortunately they did not report many instances of ethnic tension with local neighbours. However, there were some examples where relationships with neighbours broke down and were exacerbated by a lack of inter-cultural understanding on both sides (e.g. of norms with regard to parking, loud parties, etc).

Below, we detail further findings of the research with regard to four housing categories: the private rental sector; social housing; emergency housing; and employer-provided accommodation.

PRIVATE RENTAL SECTOR

- Experiences in the **private rental sector were very mixed**. Some migrants had fairly positive experiences, even though they were living in what would be considered quite cramped living arrangements. For example, one couple shared a single room in a shared flat. They spoke warmly about their landlords and the cheap rent, which enabled them to save money, and even compared it to communal flats during the Soviet period. Although they may feasibly have been able to afford to rent their own property, renting a room only enabled them to save more and send more money home to their adult children. Thus, such decisions could involve a balancing of different needs depending on circumstances.
- In Aberdeen, housing shortage and unavailability of suitable and affordable accommodation was mentioned in both expert and migrant interviews as the key issue facing migrants in the city. Private housing could be more affordable in rural areas, but could still be of low quality.
- **Understanding how the rental market worked could be difficult**, especially for new arrivals and those with little English. Migrants variously used Gumtree, Facebook, online local migrant networks, local newspapers, and agencies to find private rental properties.

> It's also difficult to get a flat, for example if you want to rent one - because there are good Scottish people you can trust, but there are others too... So when you rent a flat, to be able to trust the landlord, you go to the flat and see if it's all okay, and if you like it, and you sign a contract. You also get different kinds of contracts, and if you don't speak English, you just trust it and sign up. Then when you give back the flat, sometimes you don't get the deposit back
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> **Svetlana, 44, Latvian, Fish Factory Worker**

- In Peterhead, as found in previous studies,[1] many migrants rented accommodation in the centre of town – this was generally considered an undesirable area to live in by local residents. Migrant flats in this area tended to be in very old, run-down buildings. **Security could also be an issue in communal housing**, where rooms were rented individually by landlords.
- Helping out family and friends who had recently moved to Scotland was very common, but this could lead to **overcrowding**. One participant who was renting privately took in her brother's family for over six months as he tried to get a job, resulting in ten people sharing a two-bedroom house. The brother's family could not find private rental accommodation due to being unable to provide proof of a high enough income, as they were relying on seasonal, zero-hour contracts; because of this, their attempt to settle in Aberdeenshire was unsuccessful.
- People were very reluctant to report overcrowding to the authorities as this could lead to evictions. One group of farm workers, who had previously been made homeless living in London, had come up to Aberdeenshire and had been forced to sleep in a room shared by up to ten strangers; another example is provided below.

> **OLESYA:** In [one village nearby] we had a house, though I lived there with twenty people. […] We lived in one room, ten people – eight men and two women, on the floor.
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> **KOLYA:** A few worked more during the day, some at night and then they'd swap over. We lived there for eight months.
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> **Olesya, 28 & Kolya, 33, Latvian, fish factory workers**

- **Housing conditions were often poor** – we saw a few bad cases of damp, mould or severe draughts in Aberdeenshire rental properties which landlords had failed to address.

[1] See Shubin, S. & Dickey, H. (2013), Integration and Mobility of Eastern European Migrants in Scotland. *Environment and Planning A*, Volume 45, Issue 12.

ESTERE: I don't like how Scottish people have started renting out their flats in a very bad condition. They have kettles in there that cost 6 pounds or something, then they rent it out for 600-700 pounds a month. High prices but there is nothing in the flat. Everything is done at minimum and everything is old. Cupboards that should have been flung out years ago. It is pretty shoddy behaviour.

DANUTE: This summer my fridge broke down. I called the letting agency. […] So I got home, and the [new] fridge is sitting in the middle of my small kitchen. It was too big to fit in the space of the old one, so they left it in the middle of the room! For three days I walked around it. [laughs] Then my husband cut the units up and fit the fridge in. Lucky I had him - if I had been alone with kids I would have gone on walking round it.

ESTERE: Some kind of regulations should be in place, the rent is so high but there is no decent standards in the flats. I don't understand it.

Danute, 47, Lithuanian, fish factory worker & Estere, 25, Latvian, shop assistant

- Migrants' lack of local social support (e.g. to make informal childcare arrangements) could make them more vulnerable. One extreme case of this in a communal property involved a man from a lower floor grooming and then attempting to assault one woman's young daughter, who was left alone in the room after school hours while the woman finished work.
- In other cases, **landlords exploited newly arrived migrants' lack of local knowledge** – for example, walking into a rented property without prior permission. This was particularly difficult for women – one spoke about feeling vulnerable taking a shower as the male landlord could just walk in at any time. In other cases, migrants signed contracts that were not explained properly to them, or paid rent inclusive of energy bills but were then liable for further bills received on top of this.

Because [migrants] don't know a lot about their rights, a lot of the time they lose [out], especially when they're evicted […] and they are coming to housing for help. Because a private landlord knows much more about the law. […] You can't even imagine how many families I've [dealt with in my job] where the decision was made that they're actually intentionally homeless. Families with children, and the local authority refused to give them anything, any help, and they usually had a month to find a private rental.

Katya, 32, Lithuanian, community worker

- Some migrant families had trouble securing a private rental property due to **landlords' reluctance to let to families with children**, meaning they might have to fall back on lower quality properties with issues such as damp.

SOCIAL HOUSING

- Many migrants had been able to secure local authority housing, though those arriving in Scotland closer to EU A8 accession in 2004 tended to have had more success due to higher demand in recent years.
- The majority of migrants had not made plans to stay permanently in Scotland – **settlement was more often a gradual decision over a number of years**. This put some off applying for social housing in the few years after they initially arrived.

> I didn't apply [for social housing] because I didn't know how long I would be here. Maybe that's my problem, because I don't know how long, but I just stay… time just flies. I've been here seven years – oh my god, [it's] just amazing [that it's been that long].
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> **Vitalija, 35, Lithuanian, Care Worker**

- There was a general **lack of understanding of how social housing was distributed** according to need via points systems. Both migrants and expert interviewees noted the common perception that the housing queues were run somehow unfairly – that particular nationalities or types of people would be able to 'jump the queue' or receive favourable treatment.
- Migrants in Aberdeen complained about being given **social housing in areas of multiple deprivation**, such as Torry, which already have high migrant populations. This was experienced as discrimination: one Hungarian interviewee spoke about a perception that migrants were sent there because it was assumed they put up with less desirable housing or a less desirable area.
- Although some migrants may have spent several years settling in larger towns, the demand for housing in these areas meant that **they had to choose between being given social housing in small, rural villages where there was more availability, or staying in privately rented accommodation waiting for a town property to become available** (which could take several years).
- Migrants who did opt to take council or housing association properties in smaller villages spoke positively about, for example, the quietness of rural living. However, such placements were not always ideal and could compound typical migrant problems such as social isolation, especially for those with a low level of English. There was little ESOL support and very limited opening hours for public spaces such as libraries in more rural areas. Furthermore, public transport could be patchy, leading to trouble getting to work when working late or early shift patterns in factories, for example.
- Obtaining social housing was not necessarily the only issue: migrants with little money had sometimes been given a property with no floor coverings or furniture. Having often spent considerable sums moving to Scotland, they might then have to rely on social contacts to help them get established with furnishings and white goods.

EMERGENCY HOUSING

- We spoke to quite a few participants who had become homeless and had been provided with hostel or bed and breakfast accommodation. Some hostels were privately owned, but residents received welfare support to pay rent.
- A lack of understanding of how housing worked in Scotland could make migrants more vulnerable to homelessness:

> [Some migrants don't realise] what they need to support themselves through the month. It is so different from their homeland: you have to pay Council Tax, you have to pay this and that and depends on if your electricity is on a meter… you come here and you have no idea what to expect[…] There are so many sad cases where people are homeless eventually because they don't have anything or anywhere to go
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> **Expert interview with Equality Development Officer, Police Scotland**

- Whilst some hostels were clean, seemed orderly and had en-suite rooms, migrants living there had little space and had to share cooking facilities. They could have rules about how often and what hours you could be out of the building, which some individuals struggled with. With high security and locks on, for example, all the kitchen cabinets, the environment could be stifling: one migrant referred jokingly to it as "the jail" and compared it to living at home as a teenager with her parents.
- **Although hostels/B&Bs were usually intended to be temporary/emergency housing provision, some migrants we spoke to had been staying there longer term**. However, this was sometimes by choice (e.g. waiting for a property to become available in Peterhead rather than taking up an available flat in Fraserburgh).

> [Welfare support] helps us cover the cost of accommodation, because the hostel is very expensive. I paid £115 per week. People renting rooms in flats will pay a maximum of £50. However, if I stay in the hostel I have a chance of getting my own council flat in 6 months. Right now it is temporary and I pay more…
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> **Boris, 62, Latvian, unemployed agricultural worker**

- Some migrants preferred being placed in a B&B, though this very much depended on its quality and location. For example, due to a lack of council housing, one woman had to stay eight months in a property where there were several drug-linked deaths and lots of noise and disturbance on a regular basis.

BUYING PROPERTY

> If you are not in the oil industry and you don't earn that kind of money, it isn't easy at all [to buy a house around here]. Similar, it's not London prices, but it's probably the second most expensive place in Britain after London. Having said that, moving 30 or 40 miles away from Aberdeen, the effect starts to lessen: so places like Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Banff are more affordable than Aberdeen, Inverurie, Stonehaven.
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> **Expert interview with Aberdeenshire County Council worker**

- As our research focused on long-term settled migrants, our participants had been living in Aberdeen/shire for up to twelve years and a minority had been able to purchase their own property.
- In general, migrants had positive views of the house buying process in Scotland, saying it was easy and fairly straightforward – especially in comparison to countries such as Poland, where the process was more bureaucratic.
- **Many migrants considered buying a house a long-term goal, but were constrained by finances and the fact that housing could be expensive** in Aberdeen/shire at the time the research was taking place. There was a recognition that buying property typically required being settled and established in a reliable job for several years, enabling people to save for a deposit and commit to mortgage payments.

> Buying a house was simple, you pay the money and that's it! [laughs] […] From my experience [at work], it's clear that once you've been here five or six years you can buy a house. Of course, people working at a fish factory can't afford a house for £300,000. However it's easier to buy a house somewhere in [the town] for £80-100,000.
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> **Kyrylo, 34, Ukrainian, Small Business Owner**

- Experts working in Aberdeen City spoke about a growing number of Polish HMO landlords who rented properties to other migrants.
- Third sector bodies in Aberdeen, such as the Polish Association, ran seminars on how to buy a property. In more rural areas, some migrants received help from local, hourly-paid interpreters/advisors, who would go with them to solicitors and guide them through the process. Others drew on local contacts made through their jobs and received help and advice this way.
- One interviewee described feeling marginalised by Scottish work colleagues after buying a property due to the perception that it was not something migrants were generally supposed to do. This makes a wider point about perceptions of migrants and their status in Scottish society.

- Several migrants in this study maintained properties in their countries of origin that they rented out or allowed their family to stay in, though this seemed to be less common the longer they had stayed in Scotland.

EMPOLYER PROVIDED HOUSING

- A small number of migrants in the study were living or had previously lived in employer-provided accommodation. This arrangement had been more popular in the early EU accession period (c.2004-2007), when there were many fewer CEE migrants living in Aberdeen/shire.
- Types of housing included shared flats or houses owned by employers; dormitory-style accommodation; or shared caravans/Portakabins, which were more typical on farms employing seasonal workers.
- Housing provided by employers (e.g. flats linked to fish factories) in the early EU accession period had by some accounts been of poor quality and overcrowded. Agencies would bring migrants to Scotland on the promise that housing would be sorted out in advance, but some individuals found themselves in very poor conditions.

> We were promised there would be a flat rented out, just come and pay your money. Everything's ready for youse [sic]. When we arrived, I was completely like – 'what?! I'll sleep in the car, I'm not going in there!' It was a little room: just I would say for one person, not for a couple. But in that little room, in a single bed were sleeping me and my ex-husband. In another double bed were sleeping my pal, her husband and their daughter. […] there was no space to move at all, and the shower was all muddy and black.
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> **Audra, 25, Lithuanian, former fish factory worker**

- **Both seasonal and settled agricultural workers were more likely to live in employer-provided accommodation**. Some farms had built on-site, Portakabin style dormitories with shared shower blocks, toilets, kitchens and common rooms. Seasonal fruit-pickers in Aberdeenshire tended to live in on-site caravans of varying quality, though most seemed overcrowded (i.e. 4-5 people to one caravan over several months) and cramped (i.e. washing hanging in already tiny living areas). They had to pay separately for rent, gas and electricity, and were only able to go food shopping on certain days due to their lack of transport and the rural locations of the farms. Although there was plenty of sociability amongst these workers, their rural isolation meant they had little contact with the local community.

How many people live in this caravan?

At the moment, five people.

And do you all have separate rooms, or is it shared bedrooms?

Two… three… [myself and my friend] live here [in the communal sitting room/kitchen area]

[…] **Is it quite difficult to live with so many people in a small space?**

Not exactly. For two months, it's no problem. It's like on a campsite when we were children.

Endre, 29, Hungarian, Agricultural Worker

- These participants tended to have a neutral attitude towards these situations due to their temporary nature. However, experts we interviewed told us about agricultural workers in a similar situation whose employers demanded a significant deposit and who were then charged for caravan accommodation, heating, etc through their wages, leaving them very little actual pay left by the time they had paid off these charges. This kind of situation could increase insecurity for migrants who were already in precarious financial situations, and entail them becoming more reliant on the employer.
- In several cases, employers had not provided accommodation but given newly arrived migrants help renting a property in the locale, which migrants themselves counted as very significant to settling comfortably into a new context.
- Some more settled agricultural workers lived in houses owned by their employers in nearby villages. On the whole, they were very happy with this provision and it gave them a sense of security in the local area, as opposed to the insecurity migrants often faced in privately rented accommodation.

OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Many housing problems faced by migrants also reflect issues faced by the wider population – from unscrupulous private landlords, to long waiting lists for social housing, to a lack of affordable properties for first-time buyers. However, **a lack of familiarity with the Scottish system, social norms and language can add extra layers of difficulty for migrants** - for example, making them more vulnerable to unscrupulous landlords, or less aware of the help available to them in terms of social housing.
- Social housing providers may find it useful to provide **clear written explanations (e.g. in leaflets, online) in different migrant languages of the rules they follow in distributing properties that become available** (i.e. on the basis of need or points systems). This would help to avoid misunderstandings around entitlements or waiting periods, which can contribute to inter-ethnic tension.

- Awareness could be raised amongst private housing providers (e.g. letting agencies, landlords) that **migrants who have recently arrived often find it difficult to provide UK references, bank accounts or credit profiles**. A local authority or third sector scheme to provide guarantors in such circumstances could prove beneficial.
- Third sector bodies have been useful in providing information on housing for migrants, and this could be continued. This would also help to avoid migrants having to pay privately for advice services.
- **Employers can also play a key role** in helping migrant workers to find suitable accommodation and dealing with any necessary paperwork. Campaigns to raise awareness amongst employers of the long-term benefits of providing pastoral help to migrant employees could benefit both sides.