



MIGRANTS AND LANGUAGE LEARNING 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.

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)

When you don't have language skills for communication you're in a prison – your own prison. So I understood [when I arrived] that I needed to learn languages to be able to be part of the community. Not only to understand a little bit, but to know about the culture and just be part of the community.

Monika, 37, Latvian, community worker

INTRODUCTION

- Language was a key issue for the group of migrants interviewed in the SSAMIS project, and as such had very complex effects: it cut across every sphere of life and had a significant impact on migrant experiences of moving to Aberdeen/shire. The most important aspect of this was the level of English language that migrants had – both upon arrival, and as they settled in Scotland.
- **Language affected what kind of jobs they were able to access and their ability to connect with the local community.** Those who did not manage to gain English language skills faced **difficulties in occupational mobility** and tended to be limited to low-skilled, low-paid sectors of the local job market. Knowledge of English language also played a big role in how confident migrants felt in Aberdeen/shire, and thus to their **wider emotional wellbeing**.

I would like to be able to communicate on the same level as I am able in Polish: joking, everything. Speaking a language [works on] so many levels. When you grow up in a culture, [there is a] history which is related. One word is related to so many different subjects - I enjoy that in Polish and I would like to be able to do that in English as well, to feel that I am part of it completely.

Katryzyna, 40, Polish, administrator

- Knowledge of languages other than English also played a role in migrant experiences – if individuals ended up working in industries with many other migrants (e.g. fish processing factories), the **default working language could be Russian or Polish**, for example. Thus many end up learning a new Slavic language at work. Although this in itself is not negative, it could mean that they had few opportunities to improve their English or move past a basic communicative level. (For more information, see SSAMIS report *Migrants and Employment in Aberdeen/shire*, 2017).
- Different people struggled with different aspects of English: for some, writing was more difficult, whereas others found it hard to communicate on the phone. Thus language difficulties caused problems on an everyday basis for those with low levels of English

What I've noticed here in the UK, if you have a problem you can't deal with it via email. [...] You need to call everywhere to solve a problem. This causes problems because I can't call them. For example, in Lithuania you can email [your internet provider], it's very convenient. [...] If I speak English face to face like with you, for example, I understand, but on the phone it's a whole different story.

Tomas, 42, Lithuanian, fish factory worker

- Below, we detail some of the findings on ESOL from the project, finishing with a case study of a language café SSAMIS started in collaboration with other local groups as part of our participatory action research phase. Through this, we hope to provide an example of some successful outcomes and recommendations for future policy initiatives.

ESOL PROVISION AND EXPERIENCE

- Although many migrants attended ESOL classes, at the time interviews were carried out (2014-15) **ESOL provision did not always meet their needs**. For example, many shift workers' irregular hours prohibited them from attending the classes available, or meant they were too tired to do much outside of work, and others had issues with childcare.
- ESOL provision was also a particular issue for **migrants living in more rural villages and on farms**, where public transport was not always regular or reliable. Low levels of English could compound social isolation for, for example, those who had been given social housing in such areas where there may have been few other migrants (for more information, see SSAMIS Report *Migrants and Housing in Aberdeen/shire*, 2017).
- Free classes run by the Workers' Education Authority (WEA) were popular for those in employment.
- Church groups also provided **informal English lessons** where migrants could bring their children, and were particularly successful in meeting the need for newly arrived migrants to learn the basics of communication in English, communicate with native speakers, and build social connections locally with native speakers and other migrants.
- A minority of migrants had been able to access free English lessons at work, which helped them to fit language learning into their schedule.

- Local authorities and third sector organisations sometimes had **problems sourcing ESOL teachers** to work in the rural Aberdeenshire region, which had an effect on the amount of provision in the area.
- When the majority of a migrant’s work colleagues were Scottish, this helped them to improve their language skills. (See also SSAMIS report *Migrants and Employment in Aberdeen/shire*, 2017.)

[You have] very good English – it’s very idiomatic, very colloquial.

DAWID: That was because people at work...

JOLANTA: Yeah, I think mostly because we had a chance to work not just in the fish factory, where you can’t speak. But we had a job [in a local factory] where we could speak. We had night shifts, so you could sit and speak all night.

DAWID: It was important that the rest of the workers were from Scotland, it was amazing.

Jolanta, 28, and Dawid, 37, Polish, small business owners

LANGUAGE AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

- Many migrants who had a good level of English when they moved to Scotland initially had **difficulty understanding the Scots/Doric spoken in the area**. Many migrants – even those with only conversational English - acquired local Doric/Scottish phrases and ways of speaking.

[I got a local accent] just because of family, I think... and my job as well, because your residents want you to speak properly so they’d understand you completely. Their mental health, you know... if you don’t speak to them the way they want you to, or they don’t understand you, they get really frustrated.

Audra, 25, Lithuanian, mental health care worker

- **Migrant children were, on the whole, found to adapt well to speaking English** at school, and parents appreciated the extra help their children were given. However, if parents retained a low level of English, this could put pressure on children as the only fluent English speakers in the family (e.g. having to translate for their relatives in various situations) and affect power dynamics within the family.

- The widespread issue of low levels of English language amongst migrants had led to several **private interpreters** working in rural Aberdeenshire, charging a fee (generally around £20 per session) to accompany migrants to medical appointments or help them fill in welfare or mortgage paperwork, for example. Similar individuals existed in Aberdeen. Some worked very informally, whereas others set up an office in local towns.
- There was also a crossover with interpreters providing services for Police Scotland and the local courts. However, although these interpreters often held professional qualifications, such services were unregulated and therefore had the potential to cause conflicts and vulnerabilities for migrants and interpreters. For example, one interpreter was put in a difficult situation when a client involved in a criminal case questioned the interpretation they had been provided with, and the interpreter was forced to defend their professional skills.
- On an informal level, **migrant volunteers and local community workers** also provided free ad hoc help via services such as Citizens Advice Scotland and community cafes.
- Language Line was used at medical appointments, though this was not always available at short notice (e.g. for GP appointments or at A&E). Migrants who had been hospitalised (e.g. for injury or on maternity wards) were generally happy with having been provided with suitable NHS interpreters. (See also SSAMIS report, *Migrant Experiences of Healthcare in Aberdeen/shire*, 2017.)
- However, it is important to note that language was a complex issue, and even advanced proficiency did not mean that migrants would not encounter difficulties being or feeling understood: cultural knowledge and differences were also part of this.

LENA: When you're speaking with a Scottish person, an English speaker, trying to explain the same thing, they won't understand. It's like a kind of background, culture-wise [thing]. So, for example, nobody English can... well, yes they can feel sorry for me, they can kind of understand what I'm talking about...

ALISA: They're very sympathising people.

LENA: Sympathising, yes. But to get at a problem in the root, they're kind of... hmm. [...] It's the cultural barrier.

ALISA: It's probably the cultural thing here, yes. They simply cannot: they're trying to understand you to the best of their ability, but they can't, because their head works differently. They've got different cultural and traditional things.

Alisa, 45, Russian & Lena, 42, Latvian, both interpreters

CASE STUDY: Ongoing SSAMIS Language Initiatives in Aberdeenshire

Colleagues from the SSAMIS project have successfully put some of the findings above into practice during a period of participatory action research. Since July 2016, the **Peterhead 'Make it Happen' community language café** run by SSAMIS, in collaboration with the WEA, local arts group Modo, has provided migrant-focused ESOL alongside cultural and family-centred activities with the aim of promoting social justice via language, creativity and education.

The café was initially supported by Scottish Government funding via the initiative 'Choose Peterhead', helping to facilitate their aim of establishing a community hub with associated activities. A previously under-utilised space in the Old Happit shop in Peterhead town centre has since been transformed into a vibrant and active community hub with activities which are open to all.

Because everyone is welcome, there is a **focus on community integration rather than encouraging a view of the language café as a migrants-only space**. This is also facilitated by **regular events**: for example, a CPR workshop, gardening sessions, art and animation workshops, talks by migrants on Scottish tourism, and activities linked to different cultural celebrations depending on the time of year.

Because migrants, as mentioned above, often found the timing of rural Aberdeenshire ESOL classes difficult to attend, **the café alternates daytime and evening classes** on a week-by-week basis. This enables more people to attend the café regularly, fitting in better with shift work and making it more likely that they will be able to make a noticeable improvement in their language skills through regular study and cultural activities.

From the start, the language café has developed an **active Facebook group which supports the building of local networks for attendees**, and further facilitates language learning based on real-life interactions. At the time of writing, the café has around 150 Facebook followers.

The language café helps to address **issues of loneliness and social isolation amongst migrants** – which was also a key issue highlighted in SSAMIS research.

The cafe has recently received funding into 2018, and through building a strong base of regular attendees and an informal and fun atmosphere, the organisers hope to continue this work into the foreseeable future.

OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is vital that policymakers continue to **recognise the role of ESOL provision in facilitating the integration of migrants into local communities**. Improving levels of English language leads not only to improved employment opportunities for individual migrants, but enables them to have better access to, and interaction with, for example, schools, local authorities, and third sector organisations. Because of this, ESOL provision should remain a central tenet of improving equalities outcomes for policymakers.
- Making a **mixture of formal and informal language learning opportunities** available to migrants is key to addressing their needs as individuals with very varied language levels, personal situations, employment sectors, and everyday needs. This applies to both newly-arrived migrants and long-term residents of Scotland.

- SSAMIS-led community cafes have demonstrated **the role of ESOL provision in enhancing migrants' understanding of Scottish culture and their local social networks**, and thus their sense of security, particularly in rural areas where social opportunities are not as plentiful as in cities and larger towns.

