

Living in Wales - the housing and homelessness experiences of central and east European migrant workers

Research Aims

This study explores the housing and homelessness experiences of households from eight of the new member states that joined the European Union in 2004. The eight accession countries (A8) are Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia.

Although migrants from these central and east European countries have received considerable media attention, research has concentrated on their experiences in the workplace with limited work on their housing situations. The more specific issue of homelessness amongst central and east European migrants has also been insufficiently explored in Wales. Between 2004 and 2009, there were around 25,000 registrations on the Workers Registration Scheme (WRS) in Wales by central and east European workers (Home Office, 2009). However there was no evidence about whether central and east European migrant workers were approaching housing and homelessness support providers and consequently limited recognition that homelessness might be an issue. In this context Shelter Cymru, in partnership with Cardiff and Swansea Universities, secured funding from The Big Lottery Fund Research Programme to undertake research to address this evidence gap. The research involved interviews with 83 central and east European migrant households in three case study areas: Bridgend, Carmarthen and Wrexham. A smaller number of Roma households were also interviewed. The experiences of these households are diverse and are intended to be illustrative rather than representative of the experiences of the wider population.

A central aim of the research was to provide empirical evidence of housing issues and homelessness amongst central and east European migrant workers. The research also aims to increase awareness of homelessness as an issue amongst migrant workers and highlight the implications for policy and local service delivery at both Wales and UK level.

Findings Motivations

Economic opportunities were found to be the most important motivating factors for east and central European migrants to come to Wales. Half (51%) were attracted by higher salaries and a greater range of employment options. Nearly a quarter (23%) also indicated that they migrated to join a partner or family member already living in the UK. Other motivations for migration included the desire to live and work in a different country and to experience different cultures. There are variations in the mechanisms by which migrants come to Wales with almost two thirds (61%) receiving assistance from friends and family and around a third (30%) making use of an employment agency. Employment agencies only appear to play a role in areas where there are higher numbers of migrant workers.

Housing and homelessness

There is a wide range of housing experiences among central and east European migrant workers living in Wales. Most migrants who participated in the research had experienced poor or insecure housing when they first arrived in Wales. Tied accommodation was also a problem for a small proportion. Over time, as migrant workers become more settled, they generally move into better quality accommodation. Some migrant workers however continue to experience housing that they class to be of poor quality. This evidence indicates that there may be barriers to good quality housing that remain even after migrant workers have lived in Wales for a considerable period of time. Around a third (30%) of migrant workers who participated in the research have experienced homelessness whilst living in Wales.

The causal factors associated with homelessness among migrant workers are similar to those faced by the general population and reflect a combination of structural and individual factors including unemployment, poverty, and relationship breakdown or conflicts within households. However, there is evidence from the research that the vulnerability of migrant workers to homelessness and poor housing conditions can be exacerbated by the practices of some employers or employment agencies. Although the UK government responds to the worst practices through its Gang Masters Licensing Authority (2004) there is evidence that poor practices continue, especially in relation to tied accommodation. Some migrants have experienced homelessness as a result of the loss of accommodation tied to employment and are also exposed to exploitative employment practices and poor housing. An additional structural factor associated with homelessness among migrant workers is the restriction on access to public funds for those who have become unemployed before completing a 12-month period of work whilst registered on the WRS. Fewer than two thirds (63%) of migrant workers who participated in this research were registered on the WRS with implications for their housing situation should they become unemployed.

Services

Larger numbers of migrant workers from central and east Europe are living in Carmarthenshire and Wrexham than in other areas of Wales and there are a greater number of organisations providing support in these areas. The Welsh Polish Association in Llanelli, and the Red Cross and Caia Park Partnership in Wrexham provide examples of such organisations. Research was also undertaken with local authorities in Wales. None of those who responded had specific policies to address the needs of migrant workers and only two had undertaken research into the housing needs of this population. Many migrant workers who participated in the research were unaware of the services to which they are entitled or reticent to approach local authorities because of linguistic barriers or the perception that they are not eligible for assistance. The research suggests that while some migrant workers may be aware of their rights and entitlements, others lack this knowledge. This may have consequences when migrant workers face changes in circumstances and require assistance.

Migrant workers who experience homelessness often stay temporarily with friends or family. Some are able to access temporary accommodation. A small number of respondents had spent periods of time sleeping rough. The findings of this research suggest that most homelessness among central and east European migrants is hidden, with households not approaching local authorities for assistance and preferring to find temporary solutions with friends or family. None of the three case study authorities had received a significant number of requests for assistance from migrant workers.

The meaning of 'home'

Many migrants associated 'home' with family, belonging and a sense of togetherness and connection with others, rather than with physical buildings; whilst 'homelessness' was associated with a sense of loneliness. This may explain, at least in part, why many migrant workers perceive 'homelessness' as primarily relating to those circumstances in which individuals are sleeping rough, because they do not have family and friends with whom they can stay. Less than half (46%) of migrant workers indicated an intention to remain in Wales in the longer-term.

Most migrants had positive experiences of their neighbourhoods, including the schools and socialising with the local population. As in other studies, the research also found instances of discrimination and racism towards migrant workers. Although these appear to be mainly isolated incidents, the issue of discrimination and community cohesion requires further attention.

Recommendations

The findings of this research have implications for policy and practice in relation to central and east European migrant workers living in Wales. These include:

1 Raising awareness of services and entitlements, for example as part of the Assembly Government's work to implement the Homelessness Plan. **The Welsh Assembly Government** should work with major employers and employment agencies to ensure that existing information is distributed to migrant workers employed in the range of industries across Wales. **Local authorities** should ensure all relevant staff members receive appropriate and ongoing training regarding migrant workers' entitlements to support and assistance. Advice and support providers should improve the promotion and provision of services to migrant workers and work with **Race Equality Councils and local community organisations** to raise awareness of the rights and entitlements of migrant workers.

2 Addressing the particular housing difficulties of migrant workers who have no recourse to public funds. **Local authorities** should improve monitoring practices to identify the numbers and situation of migrant workers who may be vulnerable to homelessness and should ensure that staff are trained to assess the situation and entitlements of migrant workers. **The Welsh Assembly Government** should explore best practice in England for those who have no recourse to public funds and whether similar measures should be introduced in Wales. Local authorities should ensure that staff are trained in undertaking assessment of the rights and entitlements of migrant workers.

3 Building cohesive communities and addressing prejudice and discrimination. In order to ensure a robust evidence base for addressing issues at the local level, the **Welsh Assembly Government** should regularly collect and publish data on migrant workers (similar to the Home Office Monitoring Report). **Local authorities** and their partners should ensure that work on equality and diversity considers the local community situation with regard to migrants in order to detect and actively challenge discrimination. Educational initiatives are needed to ensure that there is greater local knowledge of the rights of migrant workers. Local authorities should conduct robust local research into the housing needs of central and east European migrant workers to inform their housing strategies and community plans.

4 Understanding the experiences and needs of migrant workers. Policy and practice should be based on evidence. Further on-going research is needed to assess the impact of current policies (including in relation to public funds) on central and east European migrant workers, including the impact on particular groups. It is also important to understand the implication of wider changes, including changes in the economy and housing market, for migrant workers living in Wales.

Further information

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The full report: **Living in Wales - the housing and homelessness experiences of central and east European migrant workers in Wales** is available to download free on the Shelter Cymru website sheltercymru.org.uk

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