



Engaging Difference

**the opportunity of diversity
in a changing county meath**

Meath Migrant Research Publication

Engaging Difference:

the opportunity for diversity in a changing Meath

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Report Abstract

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On behalf of

Meath Citizens Information Service

And

Meath County Development Board

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Joint Foreword

Meath Citizens Information Service

Meath Citizens Information Service is delighted to have taken an active part in this excellent initiative. The population of Meath has increased dramatically over the last few years. Presently there are 15,000 foreign nationals living in County Meath and to date there has been no measure of their experiences of living in this county. This research is a snap shot of what migrants are experiencing in County Meath.

I would like to thank Meath County Council and Meath County Development Board for their full support for this valuable research project. I would also like to thank Ned Rispin for his hard work on the project.

I believe that the recommendations in this report can be used as a stepping stone for the development of a county that is inclusive where every person is valued and encouraged to be the best they can be.

Mairead Byrne
Chairperson, Meath Citizens Information Service

Joint Foreword

Meath County Development Board

On behalf of Meath County Development Board (CDB), I would like to welcome this publication *'Engaging Difference: the opportunity for diversity in a changing Meath'*, which provides an insight into the opportunities and challenges which present to migrants living and working in County Meath. This is the first time that this type of research has been conducted within the county and I would like to commend all agencies and individuals involved.

I would especially like to thank the Citizens Information Service who took the lead role in overseeing the project and also the CDB who provided funding through their representative organisations. I would also like to congratulate the Social Inclusion Measures (SIM) Group (a sub group of the CDB) who endorsed the project at an early stage and provided the opportunity for agencies and individuals to become involved in the Project Steering Committee. Without the commitment and dedication of the Project Steering Committee, this research would not have been as comprehensive and reflects the positive nature and benefit of interagency work. It is also important to recognize the enthusiasm and commitment of Dr. Alan Bruce, Universal Learning Systems who undertook the research in association with the Project Steering Committee.

This publication is of benefit to all agencies and members on Meath County Development Board and I welcome the future opportunity for diversity in a changing Meath as outlined within the research.

James Mangan

Chairperson, Meath County Development Board

Background

The population of Meath has changed in many ways over the last 10 years. With a population of over 164,000 people ('06 CSO), the requirements for social services and social/recreational activities has also changed. Over the last 5 – 7 years Meath Citizens Information Service (CIS) has seen a substantial increase in the number of foreign nationals visiting CIC's, enquiring about all aspects of life from health, employment, training, education, social, culture and information. To date there has been no research into this area in Meath, which is necessary for future planning within the county.

Meath CIS approached Meath County Development Board who immediately recognised the value of the research for all agencies operating a service in Co. Meath and endorsed their full support. The following organisations formed the Project Steering Committee which aimed to develop, manage and fund the project:

- Meath VEC
- Meath Partnership
- Cultur
- Meath CIS
- HSE
- RAPID
- Meath County Development Board
- Department Of Social & Family Affairs
- FAS
- Meath County Council
- SIPTU

The following summary looks at regional, national and international research while highlighting local experiences of foreign nationals coming to and living in Meath. The recommendations should be used as a cornerstone for change in County Meath and has the potential to be modeled around the country.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this research was to investigate the circumstances of the migrant community in Co. Meath with the purpose of identifying gaps in services provided to migrants by the state, community and voluntary sectors.

The research was designed to focus on:

- Migrant experiences
- Identification of service provision issues and gaps
- Issues around education, training and employment
- Issues around health and welfare
- Issues around information and access
- Social activity and integration
- Analytical profile of demographic issues
- Analysis of national and local policies with reference to best practice and identified concerns.

The key focus was on migrants who were presenting to services for support. The research terms of reference did not include reference to the circumstances of those living in Mosney – mainly asylum seekers.

The key aims of the research project were agreed as:

- To evaluate the degree to which identified needs have been met (or otherwise) based on analysis of migrants' own experiences.
- To outline the key demographics of migrant communities in Co. Meath.
- To identify current needs with reference to policy at local, national and European levels.
- To provide an overview of relevant stakeholder agencies and services.
- To provide an analysis of current trends, issues and networks which could contribute to needs identification and response.
- To develop findings relevant to enhanced integration and service provision for migrant communities in Co. Meath.

The objectives of the review were agreed as being:

- To identify key challenges and issues.
- To identify issues around social participation and engagement.
- To undertake interviews, surveys and focus group meetings to establish issues, themes and suggested priorities.
- To develop a comprehensive consultation process.

- To consult with all relevant agencies and stakeholders.
- To determine the current identified issues, needs and concerns.
- To identify key elements for forward strategic planning.
- To make recommendations on how targets and actions can best be addressed within the context of best practice and national policy.
- To provide a comprehensive literature review and targeted recommendations for future developments.

1.1 Themes

This research indicates common trends - reflected locally. These refer to the human dimensions of migration. Free movement of labour is a cornerstone of EU policy. The sheer implications in terms of family structures, cultural differences, variations in qualifications, health, language, loneliness and social dislocation are enormous. While labour market conditions are the primary driver, the social and cultural impacts directly affect the quality of life of migrants – as well as the expectations and attitudes of host communities.

The research analyzed data from national, international and local perspectives. The literature review looked at trends at European level and cross-referenced these to policy directions articulated by both the European Union and national governments. Data was cross-referenced with information supplied by Irish national bodies centrally involved with immigration and interculturalism.

Broad trends at national and European levels suggest:

- Immigration will remain a permanent feature of most European societies.
- Inward migration is necessary to maintain economic activity and function because of altered indigenous European demographics
- Issues around accommodation and integration are highly contentious in some countries.
- Issues of xenophobia and racism have potential to cause significant issues of destabilization and conflict
- Debates around national approaches are often confused and strongly demarcated between themes around assimilation, multiculturalism, interculturalism, etc.

Uniquely, Ireland has transformed itself from a country of significant emigration to one of net inward migration in a remarkably short period of time. However, issues around prejudice, discrimination and intolerance are present. While this has not emerged consistently regarding immigrants, there is the potential to do so.

While the economic usefulness of immigrants has been acknowledged, issues arise around the capacity of Irish society to welcome national and ethnic difference in the longer term in all its cultural, religious and linguistic dimensions.

The Equality Authority in 2003 identified six major concerns of members of ethnic minorities in relation to labour market participation:

- English language skills
- Experience of discrimination
- Lack of familiarity and knowledge about processes and procedures associated with job search in Ireland
- Recognition of educational qualifications and work experience
- Information
- Childcare access

While economic issues may be the primary driver for the decision to emigrate, other issues come to the fore in the emigrant's social, cultural and communications development. Interaction with the host community (or with other different migrant communities) can produce unexpected challenges and experiences (not all of which are negative). Increasing engagement with social structures and services may contrast sharply with earlier experiences in the home country. Issues around familiarity and navigation through alien bureaucracies and systems can seem daunting. The host community too may experience issues around unfamiliar behaviour patterns or social transformations over which it feels it has no control. Migration affects all sides. It is an encounter of difference and diversity - no one is left untouched by the process.

Delineating exact and accurate statistics for the number of immigrants is problematic. By its nature, this population is constantly changing in response to socio-economic circumstances and seasonal labour demands. This has had a particular impact with the downturn in the private housing construction sector notable since January 2008. While there are initial indications of some migrants returning to their countries of origin (or a slow down in inward migration) most commentators agree that migrant communities will remain a permanent part of the Irish population.

1.2 Methodology

The Meath Migrant Research project methodology was divided in a number of stages. A series of structured interviews and consultations was carried out with a range of agencies – statutory and voluntary – and with individuals working in the five specified focus areas. Additional interviews and consultations were held with agencies and experts in migration and ethnic and intercultural integration policy at national level. Extensive consultations were held with migrant representative bodies engaged in policy, training, education and advocacy. A set of interviews was undertaken with ethnic chaplaincies and church bodies,

service providers and employers with experience of diversity management. Eight focus groups were conducted in three locations: Ashbourne, Navan and Dunshaughlin.

1.3 The situation in Co. Meath

The analysis of migrant issues and concerns in Co. Meath is just as much about change in the county itself. In something less than a generation the population of the county has doubled. There has been a corresponding transformation of the economic environment from one that was primarily agricultural and rural to one that is increasingly urbanized. Housing patterns have been profoundly affected by the explosive growth of metropolitan Dublin with increasing numbers of Meath residents commuting to work there each day. According to the 2006 Census, Meath is now the second fastest growing county in Leinster with an increase of 21.4% in population compared to the 2002 census. The national average population growth was 8.1%.

- Some 3% of the population of Meath in 2006 were non-Irish nationals who had not been living in the county one year earlier.
- Of those who had lived outside the State for one year or more, some 65.5% had taken up residence since 1991.
- 20,044 (12.4%) people in Co Meath were born outside the island of Ireland. Of these, 7,201 (35.9%) were born in Poland, Lithuania or other European countries (excluding the UK).
- 14,924 (9.2%) of people in Co. Meath in 2006 were non-Irish nationals.

2. Contexts

Individuals and groups have migrated for a number of reasons in all cultures. These have included the need to flee from violence, persecution or famine as well as more positive aspects such as adventure, seeking improved opportunities or following pre-established migratory patterns.

2.1 European trends

Population movements and migration in post-war Europe have been conditioned by the need of reconstructing economies to have access to significant labour resources. In addition to legal economic migrants, there are also “illegal” immigrants, transit immigrants, students, family reunifications, adoptions, repatriated ethnic groups, migration of post-retirement seniors, etc.

The development of migration flows over time is interesting but multilayered. The factors may include:

- Economic attractiveness of the target country
- Relative restriction in immigration policy
- Existence of language barriers
- Unemployment rates
- Historically determined relations.

Employment, or job market development, is a critical factor in fostering effective immigration policy in Europe.

2.2 Immigration in Ireland: an Overview

Since 2000 over 100,000 persons from outside the EU have been admitted to Ireland largely for reasons of employment. In addition, a substantial number has come from within the EU reflecting the EU free and open labour market. Recent census data reveal that 58% (186,000) of the State’s increased population since 2002 is attributable to immigration. Extrapolating these numbers in light of previous data suggests that there are at present approximately 400,000 non-Irish nationals living in Ireland. This is almost 10% of the State’s population of 4.23 million (2006).

This represents a remarkable change in the country’s experience of migration.

In the period 1995-2000, approximately a quarter of a million persons migrated to Ireland. Many of these were returning Irish (estimated at 50%) – thus reversing the strong

outward migration of Irish in the late 1980s. The rest were mainly other Europeans or Americans.

These realities are acknowledged in the most recent annual report of FÁS on the Irish labour market. The Review underlines that immigration has been and will continue to be crucial in realizing Ireland's infrastructural projects arising from the NDP.

2.3 Addressing Integration

The Irish Centre for Migration Studies in NUI Cork has outlined a range of pre-conditions for successful integration.

These include:

- Anti-racism and social inclusion measures
- Partnership with civil society
- Mutual and reciprocal commitments for host and migrant communities
- Fair and transparent admission policies
- Family reintegration measures
- Removal of the damaging effects of direct provision for asylum seekers – dependence and institutionalization
- Clarification of policy approaches to integration e.g. assimilation or interculturalism

It also highlights a number of practical issues to assist both host and migrant communities to address these new realities:

- Reception
- Language support programmes
- Induction programmes
- Employment
- Pathways to work.

The rapid growth experienced by the Irish economy since the mid-1990s has come to depend on high rates of immigration. Immigrants are now present in every sector of economic activity. Immigrants are here to stay and are now an integral element of Irish life. Their presence and that of their children will have a permanent effect on the nature, fabric and identity of Irish society.

3. Meath Migrant Experiences

Issues around knowledge of rights, entitlements, services and community engagement are emerging strongly in all available literature as critical ones for the new communities in Ireland. These national themes and issues were reflected in the Meath research.

Responses and issues were reviewed under five key headings:

- Employment
- Education and training
- Health
- Information
- Social and cultural

3.1 Meath background

Much of the specific Meath response to these challenges is based on earlier work undertaken by the MITE (*Meath Investment in Training and Education*) project that operated from 2005-2007. This project aimed to develop a dedicated Meath based model of partnership between State, community and voluntary groups to address labour market inequality and to increase labour market entry, retention, participation and adaptability for a number of groups – including specifically job seekers who were foreign nationals. By 2006 the MITE partnership identified five key areas where it was felt foreign national jobseekers needed assistance:

- Increased provision and access to English language classes across Meath
- Access to migrant rights information in Meath
- Assistance with job seeking activity and career guidance
- Provision of support groups and networks
- Assistance with business start-up and self-employment opportunities.

This resulted in three key initiatives that commenced in 2006 (*Training for Employment* programme, *English Language Class Initiative*, *Migrant Rights Initiative*). These initiatives were operated by Cultúr, a voluntary service provider active in Co Meath in the area of immigration and cultural integration.

Of the employee respondents to the MITE research, some 33% were non-Irish nationals. Among job seekers, a number of concerns around barriers to employment and training were identified. These included:

- Lack of flexibility in existing training, education and work practices
- Childcare

- Poor transport or physical access
- Attitudes of others
- Poor access to information
- Poor linkage between agencies and services
- Lack of clarity regarding entitlements and an associated fear of losing existing benefits
- Lack of funding for support agencies
- Language barriers
- Low expectations and low self-esteem.

3.2 Employment

Evidence at national level confirms migrant workers form an increasing part of the Irish workforce. By 2004, the Chambers of Commerce in Ireland could show that more than 20% of Irish businesses employed non-Irish nationals. Interestingly, 64% of these firms reported that they had no experience of problems with these workers.

Respondents confirmed that many jobs in Meath had been secured through extensive use of informal job finding networks. Informal work patterns were also widely reported, with the associated risks recognized and reported regarding failure by some employers to pay the minimum wage. Many migrant respondents felt this was a risk worth taking. Many migrants exist in a shadow world where escape from poor conditions at home and the desire for a quiet life and work at any cost may often outweigh investigation of substandard employment conditions and enforcement of basic rights. Issues around exploitation and abuse of working conditions were reported from vulnerable sectors – especially in agricultural and hospitality sectors.

Advocacy has become a central feature of the services provided by the Citizens Information Service in Navan. This aspect of provision has expanded significantly in recent years. According to respondents, advocacy in relation to a wide range of issues began around 2005.

The main issues are:

- Employment
- Residency status
- Tenancy agreements
- Taxation issues and understanding of these.

Individuals contact the CIS largely on the basis of word of mouth. Numbers have increased significantly. The largest number of cases is by migrants from the Polish, Lithuanian and Latvian communities. Issues about employment were identified as wage levels, terms and

conditions of employment, perceived victimization and insecurity around rights and entitlements. Respondents indicated that a significant issue for complainants was fear of reprisal. In the absence of labour inspectors these issues can become time consuming and demanding with so few resources available. Respondents from the trade union sector confirmed that in certain sectors there had been particularly worrying stories of marginalization in terms of employment, up to and including exploitation.

One way to measure the number of migrant workers in Ireland is by counting the number of Social Welfare and PPS numbers. These however are issued nationally and as yet there is no local geographic breakdown. Up to May 2006 some 300,000 new PPS numbers had been issued. The Department of Enterprise, Training and Employment does issue details of work permits on a county by county basis. Work permits are issued in respect of citizens of non European Economic Area countries who wish to work in Ireland.

Table 5
Work permits issued in Co. Meath for non-EEA nationals

	Total	New	Reissued	Refused
2005	1063	249	813	101
2006	814	206	605	34
2007	844	197	647	68
2008 (part)	169	76	93	19

Increasing migrant labour presence began to be noted after 1998. This was particularly apparent in the mushroom growing sector and in meat processing. Particular concerns in these sectors centred on the casual nature of employment and questionable practices used in recruiting workers. The employee profile was largely female (98%) and almost exclusively from Eastern Europe. Terms of employment were poor. There were many documented cases of bad practice. Respondents also acknowledged there were many good employers. In recent times, significant new agreements have been signed designed to regulate the sector and improve standards.

Issues around tied housing, poverty, exploitation and undocumented domestic work are highly problematic ones and no reliable statistics in relation to this are available simply for Co. Meath. Separate concerns were raised about the role and operation of employment recruitment agencies that are subject to few regulations in Ireland.

Employment – Meath migrant responses

Migrants themselves had extensive comments to make about their employment experiences in Ireland in general and in Meath in particular. Many described their original motivation to emigrate as largely driven by economic or employment related circumstances. In terms of general employment issues, all valued having an excellent employer, developing greater

proficiency in English and having a generally superior quality of life. On the negative side the group mentioned grave deficiencies in terms of public transport compared to services in their home countries. Some concerns were expressed around cultural differences and the lack of meaningful and close interaction with Irish friends.

For many, Ireland was seen as a land of plenty and of opportunity. A clear difference emerged between those who had secured employment through job specific recruitment and contacts on the one hand and those who arrived unprepared and willing to take their chances on the other. As in all such situations, those who did the preparatory work in advance usually fared better.

Many mentioned that they were over-qualified for jobs they currently held. Some complained about harsh employment conditions they or friends had experienced, particularly in the hospitality and mushroom processing sector. Working conditions of an exploitive character were described although many had secured positive outcomes through social networks or agency support. Those who had experienced sub-standard working conditions referred to excessive working hours, lack of information on entitlements, pay well below minimum wage conditions, unlawful deductions for board and lodging and being dismissed on the spot.

3.3 Education and training

A common issue is recognition of foreign qualifications, access to appropriate training and education and the issue of personal career development. Many migrants are actually over-qualified for positions they hold. FÁS employment offices are available to give information on training courses as well as job information. In addition, many respondents reported that they were referred to FÁS services by other agencies such as the Citizens Information Services or Cultúr. The profile of FÁS among migrant communities is largely one of job-seeking rather than training provision.

The universally agreed issue around training was language training and competence. Proficiency in the English language is a highly desired objective and clearly requires planning, coordination and resources. Provision is not currently standardized but significant contributions have been made through the efforts of Cultúr and the Meath Library Service.

Cultúr recognized that for many migrants in Meath there was no one place to go to address their range of needs. A noted feature of the Cultúr approach is to use migrants to network with and integrate other migrants. In its own training initiatives Cultúr makes use of a flexible curriculum that is based around learners' needs and availability.

An issue identified by this research centres on the limited training opportunities that are available – including those provided by employers. Migrants face a number of challenges in relation to language fluency, time, transport and individualized training needs analysis. Imaginative approaches to training need to be developed which can meet both individual

needs and employer expectations.

Education and training – Meath migrant responses

The main identified issue from the perspective of migrants in Meath was the recognition of existing qualifications and experience. Both individuals and focus groups displayed significant differences in how they evaluated the importance of education and training – reflecting various national traditions and experiences. For most respondents, the key training imperative was the acquisition of fluency in the English language. Many expressed appreciation for the role and efforts of Cultúr.

Many expressed strong determination to secure the training and education that was necessary to acquire and maintain employment. Most respondents however felt that the experience and qualifications obtained in their countries of origin should be sufficient to secure employment and appropriate status in Ireland. Many expressed strong interest in aspects of the Irish language and local culture as areas where they might be interested in further educational development.

3.4 Health

Health issues included acute or emergency services, public health matters, access to primary health care and health related information. As in other areas, migrants are as diverse as any community. A key issue was familiarity with the specific nature and structures of Irish health delivery systems. Negotiating the system is a challenge reported by many migrants. The engagement of the HSE with migrants in Co Meath is, like other regions, composed of two dimensions. One is the significant uptake of employment by non-Irish nationals (including highly skilled medical and paramedical grades). The other is the provision of services to the non-Irish national population of the county.

Community Welfare Officers have had particular experience around money, welfare issues and housing. Key identified health areas for migrants were:

- Social isolation
- Family issues
- Support issues
- Substance abuse (alcohol and illegal substances)
- Infectious diseases (including TB)
- Time factors due to language issues
- Child protection

Respondents felt key priorities should be for a defined inter-agency strategy in Meath – ongoing fragmentation needed to be replaced by focused linkage. A critical development

over the life of the present research was the development and launch of the HSE intercultural strategy in February 2008. This sets national standards and policy for addressing the needs of migrant communities at national level for the first time.

From this emerged four priorities:

- Information, language and communications
- Service delivery and access
- Changing organizational culture to reflect diversity and enhance learning capacity and knowledge
- Working in partnership with ethnic minorities.

Health – Meath migrant responses

For many migrant respondents health was not seen as a major pre-occupation. This reflects the fact that most respondents were young and single and saw little need to engage with health services or agencies on a regular basis. This changed significantly as longer term engagement with Irish society developed. For many, the first reported structured involvement resulted from pregnancy and childbirth.

Many expressed confusion and uncertainty about the role and function of the General Practitioner. Some respondents indicated that they would prefer to consult Polish specialists (either at Polish clinics in Dublin or on trips home) or to contact an Irish specialist directly. Almost all respondents reported that they found the levels of health care that they had experienced in Ireland to be very good, professional and supportive. Some respondents had experienced lengthy waiting periods in emergency admissions and this had been confusing and a source of anxiety.

Deeper engagement with health services can be expected as length of residence and/or integration into the economic structures of Irish society deepens. Some respondents had experienced maternity care through pregnancy and childbirth. All the respondents had found the services and systems to be excellent and supportive.

3.5 Information

Throughout this research, access to appropriate and relevant information has been highlighted as a critical issue. Unfamiliarity with the policies, procedures and structures of Irish life is a common characteristic of many immigrant groups.

A particularly informative response was received from the *Co Meath Library Service*. Direct and explicit involvement with migrants and ethnic minorities commenced in 2003 with specific engagement with the population resident in Mosney. Significant uptake of library facilities and resources by non-Irish nationals and migrants has been noted in all branches since then. A noted element has been the use of the Library service as a resource to

provide information, cultural enrichment and contact with the wider Irish society.

Meath County Library undertook a survey on library service needs of foreign nationals and was able to identify barriers which affect the ways in which library services relate and respond to the various national communities. These included:

- A lack of policy and planning
- A lack of suitable stock
- Budgetary constraints – some 83% of authorities were not in a position to allocate specific resources for foreign nationals
- A lack of language skills among staff
- A lack of culturally sensitive awareness and understanding – no training had been provided in these areas.

An interesting initiative was the hosting by Meath County Library of African Drumming Workshops. A Lithuanian art exhibition was held in Oldcastle in 2006 and an African art exhibition in Navan and Trim in 2007. A foreign film festival has attracted widespread interest and involvement. These activities underline the central role libraries can and do play in providing services, information and contact for migrant communities in Meath.

A critical service and resource for addressing the information needs of migrants in Co Meath has been the Citizens Information Service. The CIS has developed considerable expertise in addressing the needs of migrants and identifying the trends and issues. It has also taken a particularly pro-active stance in relation to professional advocacy. In many ways the CIS has evolved into a one-stop-shop for many migrants. It acts as a central point for information, linkage, networking and onward referral.

Information – Meath migrant responses

Access to information, guidance, advocacy and support were all mentioned as central issues by migrant respondents. Dealing with service provision and agency complexity was frequently described as bewildering. In this context, all respondents commented favourably on the critical role played by the Citizens Information Service.

A number of individual respondents referred to their previous employment status. For these individuals, they had been working in highly exploitive environments where any attempt to seek information, let alone advocacy or redress, was seen in an extremely negative light by their employers.

Individual stories and complaints have to be approached with fairness to all parties. They also have to be examined for veracity and set against competing viewpoints. A critical issue was fairness, transparency and justice. In this context the work of the advocacy services provided by the CIS requires specific mention. Those who had availed of this had reported very high levels of satisfaction with the process and outcomes.

3.6 Social and cultural

One of the more significant developments in Co Meath regarding interculturalism was the establishment of Cultúr in 2004. Cultúr sees its mission as promotion of intercultural awareness, community development and integration through education, training (language and intercultural), sports, arts and capacity building.

Cultúr has sought to promote and develop multi-agency cooperation and links. It has established a number of useful links and has developed a high profile as a migrant support organization. It has established a database of some 700 people and has been a critical contact point for a wide range of migrant groups. The Migrant Rights Initiative developed a focus on advocacy, networking and training as critical factors in developing migrant integration strategies. The English Language Class Initiative has proved very successful in providing classes and language training supports. It is remarkable that Cultúr has embarked on a wide range of service provision and supports without guaranteed core funding.

A key role has been played by Meath County Council. It was centrally involved in the development of an Intercultural Family Festival. This was designed to support contact, integration and cultural exchange and was supported by funding available under the National Action Plan Against Racism and included involvement of the NCCRI (*National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism*). A strong emphasis is placed on sports as an effective vehicle for promoting contact and integration between migrant and host communities. Another allied initiative promoted by a multi-agency group including the Meath County Development Board and the County Council was the establishment of a Social Inclusion Measure group.

A noted response from agencies and migrant individuals alike was the role of the Irish language. In almost all responses, migrants expressed an interest in Irish and a parallel astonishment at how little spoken or valued it seemed to be among Irish people.

The County Council has a specific remit in terms of housing and valuable responses were given regarding the specific circumstances of migrant individuals and communities. It is fully recognized that many migrants never have any contact with statutory housing services. Since around 2004 the County Council has noted an increase in numbers presenting from migrant communities. While no specific ethnic identifiers are maintained, it has become clear to staff that negotiating the system can be a significant ordeal for many non-Irish nationals. It is noted with concern that no dedicated cultural diversity training for staff exists throughout almost all service providers. Language differences remain a barrier.

Respondents reported that the critical issues for future engagement with migrant individuals and communities focused on the lack of service coordination and planning. It was felt that elements of inherent racism and ignorance could be identified. Migrant populations were described as being adrift among an indifferent environment where there was strong

evidence of lack of empathy and engagement. Agencies working in the field were frequently impaired by overwork and lack of resources.

Social and cultural – Meath migrant responses

Many migrants described Ireland as a warm and friendly place. There was comment on just how far or deep this friendliness went. While almost all confirmed that Irish work colleagues were warm and supportive, this was not seen as always extending to deeper levels of social contact or engagement. Many migrants were aware that their own cultural traditions in relation to alcohol, public houses, family and wider socializing were themselves factors in defining the nature and extent of social intercourse.

Several individuals mentioned a sense of social isolation without always being able to define this more closely. Those who were parents had established effective and strong links with other parents they met via their children's schools. All remarked positively on Irish cultural events. Many felt that Irish people made little effort to understand or engage with cultural difference and instead expected migrants to make all the adjustments.

4. Conclusions

We live at a time of profound and significant change. This change encompasses all aspects of life and all countries. The nature and scale of this change has a direct impact not just on how we see and regard others, but how we see and evaluate ourselves. The scale and impact of inward migration to Ireland is unprecedented. It means, at a minimum, that Irish systems and structures will have to shift focus and resources significantly to accommodate and respond to this change.

This research examined the impact of migration in Co. Meath in terms of services and structures as well as in terms of migrants themselves. The key element concerns the move of migrants from workers who meet labour market needs to citizens who anticipate, contribute to and interact with the host Irish community in varied ways that produce sustained benefit for all.

Managing change of the scale we are witnessing in Ireland and in Meath requires a set of attitudes and skills. This will critically remain about work, employment and the labour market in Co. Meath. The nature of employment in the county was changing anyway with the end of traditional agricultural production, the growth of the knowledge and services sector and the sprawl of metropolitan Dublin.

The removal of barriers can eventually be accomplished (at least formally) by legislation and monitoring practice. But the deeper transformation that a community requires can be expedited most rapidly by the world of productive employment seizing the opportunities offered by the diversity of migration and incorporating it into the employment process itself.

The research process in Meath shows that this process is still unfolding. Disturbing examples of bad practice, shortsighted methods and simple exploitation were cited. Many migrants had come to the conclusion that they had been vulnerable and taken advantage of. There was strong evidence produced of shoddy practice in relation to rental accommodation, evasion of legal requirements and discriminatory practice and attitudes.

It should also be borne in mind that employers and migrants who responded to this research indicated many examples of best practice, innovation and integration. Based on this and earlier research and project interventions, we can see that in Co Meath there already exists a network of employers who know and acknowledge the significant benefits that employing migrant labour have brought for all.

A central and recurring theme of this research was the need for and lack of resourced and coordinated response to appropriate English language training. Ireland seems tardy in developing English language training as a coherent, coordinated and professional skill training intervention. Its provision in Meath is largely ad hoc and unsystematic. Were it not for the valiant efforts of a voluntary body like Cultúr, provision would be minimal. The research demonstrated uneven and inconsistent levels of buy-in to issues around migration

and interculturalism. Significant gaps in cultural diversity training were identified – or even complete absence of such training.

Many complained of confusion with structures, bureaucracies or unfamiliar patterns of service provision. Some complained of racist or discriminatory experiences. But on the whole the attitudes and experiences of migrants in Meath were reported as positive.

Issues identified by migrants themselves concerned:

- English language training
- Securing and maintaining employment
- Maintaining a quality standard of living
- Supporting their families
- Lack of public transport
- Building resources for eventual return to country of origin
- Learning more and integrating with Irish culture
- Recognition of existing qualifications.

The issues identified by Irish agencies and respondents concerned:

- The need for more English language training resources
- The need to deliver quality services that met identified needs
- The need for specialist resources and expertise
- Courses for migrants run by migrants themselves
- The need to tackle substandard or exploitive employment conditions
- The need for enhanced social and cultural participation
- Improved awareness of rights, entitlements and services
- Training for Irish staff in cultural diversity
- Policy, planning and service coordination
- Additional resources to meet identified needs and required accommodations.

The issues identified by NGO and voluntary sector respondents concerned:

- The need for coordinated institutional and agency responses
- The need for language competence in the host community
- The need for social and cultural engagement
- The need for proactive welcome strategies and support initiatives for migrants
- The need for social support and contact
- Creation of a forum for learning and exchange
- Promotion of integration where desired
- Resources as required to achieve targets
- Pro-active responses to meet needs so that problems do not emerge in the medium or longer term
- The need for advocacy and networks of NGOs.

Of all the issues raised, the common issues focused on the lack of service coordination and planning. From all respondents in Meath significant concerns were expressed about the need for a central and directed policy that embedded the values of interculturalism and integration and then set out concrete and coordinated actions to achieve aims and objectives.

Many respondents strongly identified issues around lack of resources, staff overstretching and the lack of time and resources to undertake migrant specific work. In many of the responses in Meath there was a sense of enthusiasm about the potential for mutual enrichment and benefit from the new demographic conditions emerging in the county. The social and cultural opportunities opened make it possible for both migrant and host communities to learn something new about each other, themselves and the wider world of which they are both part.

The challenge will be to not squander the opportunity by letting prejudice, ignorance or apathy prevail. Linkages and networking are improving but need substantial improvement. Training and capacity building needs to be significantly developed. Information and advocacy needs to be extended and entrenched as a quality response. Proactive strategies of welcome and engagement need to be defined and implemented. The initial partnership approaches pioneered by MITE and other county agencies now need to be reinforced and deepened.

This research underlines that Meath is at a crossroads. The potential exists to make the county into a beacon of best practice in welcoming, engaging and sustaining migrant communities in a context of integration and mutual tolerance.

5. Recommendations

1. General

- a. There is no single comprehensive source of information on Irish culture, institutions and services that can inform migrants. Such a resource should be developed collaboratively by, at a minimum, the range of agencies represented in the Meath Migrant Research project (and others that may wish to contribute).
- b. The main voluntary body addressing integration and the needs of migrants in Meath is Cultúr. To extend and develop its work and mission it should secure adequate core funding and resources.
- c. Central guidelines on appropriate approaches to interculturalism, information provision and outreach should be developed for all involved agencies in Meath.
- d. A joint strategic goal of making Co Meath a model of best practice in integration and interculturalism in its welcome and support for migrant communities should be adopted at County Council level and cascaded out through statutory and voluntary service providers.

2. Information

- a. The lack of service integration can often lead to complex information difficulties and problems in meeting needs. This is compounded by inadequate levels of cross-referral and coordination between agencies. There is a need to extend the scope and range of information, advice and advocacy services. This is a prime function of the Citizens Information Centre and should be resourced accordingly.
- b. The need for coherence and coordination in addressing the needs of migrants has been strongly evidenced by this research and should be addressed accordingly. This will require policy, planning and coordinated strategy so that the various parts can be articulated effectively.
- c. A critical role in information provision is advisory and advocacy supports. These should be provided and resourced accordingly.

3. Education and training

- a. A dedicated county-wide initiative on English language training for migrants should be established and provided using a defined partnership model between statutory bodies and voluntary groups (e.g. Cultúr).

- b. Structured diversity awareness and intercultural awareness training should be developed and coordinated for the host community regarding new immigrant groups. This activity could be done on a partnership basis between voluntary bodies (such as Cultúr) and statutory agencies (such as FAS, CIS and the VEC).

4. Health

- a. Development of a coordinated multi-agency approach focused on the individual health needs of migrants should be prioritized.
- b. Direct inputs and contributions from migrants to coordinated service provision and health strategy should be facilitated and developed.
- c. Institutional buy-in for integration and interculturalism should be developed through joint policy formation and support with agencies with relevant expertise.
- d. At a time of limited resources the demands on staff should be acknowledged and addressed so that effective partnership with immigrant communities can produce meaningful outcomes in health education, promotion and service provision.

5. Employment

- a. A Meath Employers' Forum should be initiated to highlight best practice in the recruitment and retention of non-Irish national labour. An Annual Best Intercultural Workplace Award (with potential sponsorship from social partnership bodies) could facilitate examples of best practice.
- b. Direct migrant involvement with agencies such as CIS and the Library Service has already been established. Methods to provide similar direct engagement of migrant talent and skills should be investigated by agencies such as FAS and the VEC.

6. Social and cultural

- a. Multicultural days should be held annually as a point of contact between host and migrant communities.
- b. Sporting organizations at local level should promote and develop intercultural approaches. A successful model at national level (*Sport Against Racism in Ireland*) should be fostered and extended locally.
- c. Irish language organizations and Gaeltacht community groups should be encouraged to engage with migrant communities and provide lessons in Irish language and culture.
- d. The extensive experience and existing resources of the Meath Library Service should be used to develop ongoing intercultural initiatives and to support artistic and cultural expression in a wide range of media by and for immigrant communities.

7. Integration and outreach

- a. A structured initiative around welcome and integration should be developed in Meath. Modeled on the *Welcome Wagon* program in the United States. This could marshal voluntary effort and employer sponsorship to provide welcome packages and personal contact to newly arrived immigrants.
- b. Direct involvement of local and community and voluntary groups in welcoming, interacting and engaging with new migrant communities should be strongly encouraged. Building integration and interaction should be a key strategic priority for community development at all levels.
- c. Immigrant contributions to community life should be prioritized and publicized at every level in an effort to build learning and interaction for all in the community. Direct involvement of local media should be extended and coordinated.

A copy of the full research report can be obtained from the following offices and websites:

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