

Northfield Talks Immigration *with Richard Burden MP*

Introduction

Over the past few months I have organised a survey and a public meeting to hear local peoples' views and discuss the issue of immigration. The idea to get Birmingham Northfield talking about immigration was in response to the many emails, letters and conversations I have with constituents on the doorstep. I know people are worried about the management of immigration and how it affects jobs, wages, and public services like schools, social housing and the NHS.

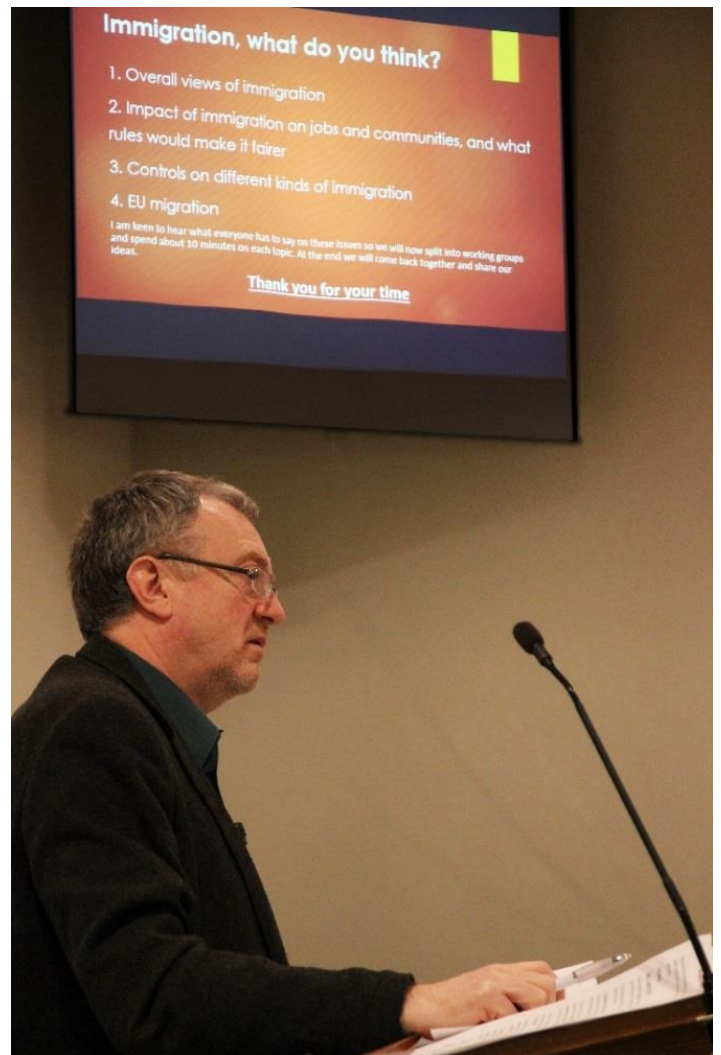
Following the end of the survey, which received hundreds of responses, I held a public meeting in January 2015, which brought together people from different ages and backgrounds to share the early findings and listen to views. This final report outlines the updated findings from the survey, along with key issues raised by constituents during the public meeting.

Thank you to everyone who participated in the survey or attended *Northfield Talks*. Thanks are also due to Dave Tubby and volunteers who supported the public meeting in the Northfield Baptist Church. I don't want the conversation to stop here. Please do get in touch to share your feedback on the issues raised at this meeting and in this report. I look forward to hearing from you.

How it worked

Before Christmas (18 December 2014) I launched a survey to collect local people's views on the issue of immigration. The survey was available online and publicised on my website, Facebook and Twitter. Paper copies were delivered to over 1000 local people thanks to volunteers in Northfield. I also forwarded copies by post to anyone who contacted me directly about immigration. The online version of the survey can be accessed [here](#).

The survey closed on 25 January 2015 and the public meeting, *Northfield Talks*, took place on 29 January 2015. There I revealed my initial findings and outlined



the facts about immigration, before attendants participated in small workshops groups. I then took comments, and shared my views and Labour's immigration policies. You can access the resources provided at the meeting [here](#) or by getting in touch.

This report outlines the findings from the 219 responses and the thoughts of over fifty attendees of the public meeting.

Key findings

- 1. Immigration is clearly an important issue but masks concerns about other things.*
- 2. Monitoring and enforcement of laws on jobs, wages and borders must be improved.*
- 3. People want the facts and a sensible debate.*
- 4. The existing government policy of a fixed cap is not working.*

1. Immigration is clearly an important issue but masks concerns about other things

The survey found a large majority (68%) of people, consider immigration to be an important issue. This was especially the case in relation to wages and working conditions.

Across the whole survey, the most common concern was the need to stop people's wages being undercut, where eighty-four per cent (84%) of people agreed there should be more resources to enforce legislation around the minimum wage and employment conditions.

Survey Respondent

"I have recently had treatment at the QE hospital where I was treated by a nurse from Romania, and she was excellent at her job. The NHS would struggle without people like that."

What that highlighted for me is that beneath people's concern about immigration are often worries about other things - about the need for better training and job opportunities for young people, about insecurity at work, about the NHS and about the shortage of good quality affordable housing.

Survey Respondent

"Since the UK is still increasingly short of nurses with the pressure on the NHS (the bigger political issue in my mind), then immigration is very positive."

Take the NHS. People responding to the survey and during the event, recognised that our hospitals simply would not function without doctors and nurses from abroad. But that is no excuse for the UK not to train up enough doctors and nurses here.



Sadly since 2010, the Government has cut nursing posts, cut student places and is failing to acknowledge the ageing nursing workforce (45% of nurses in England are over 45).¹ The Government needs to turn this around.

2. Monitoring and enforcement of laws on jobs, wages and borders must be improved

In addition to better training and opportunities for young people, a number of respondents shared other concerns about jobs and wages which create negativity towards immigration.

Respondents cited personal worries too. Electricians and builders spoke about the struggle to find work, partly because their wages are being undercut.

Survey Respondent

"A self-employed electrician I know cannot get work as [they are] constantly undercut on sites... by EU workers who have been recruited via an agency. Companies pay them less."

With eighty per cent (80%) saying they support skilled workers coming to fill specific jobs, and as already mentioned, eighty four per cent (84%) saying more resources should be given to enforcing existing laws, the real problem is obvious. Government and employers must work together better to ensure work and wage laws are fairly enforced.

Survey Respondent

"It is not the British workers or immigrants who are at fault but the corrupt industry which either is not sufficiently regulated or the regulations are not audited or applied."

Other issues raised - both during the survey and the meeting - included controls on entering the UK and the importance of people learning English if they are coming to live here.

Eighty-six per cent (86%) of constituents feel border security needs to be smarter with better staffing and border controls. That way we can properly record who is coming and leaving. It's madness that we don't have that right now.

¹ Royal College of Nursing, *Frontline First: Nursing on Red Alert*, April 2013.

3. People want the facts and a sensible debate

A key concern that stayed with me after the meeting were the comments from many attendees said they simply felt that much of the national debate on immigration was based on stat-swapping and not clear facts.

Many people recognised that parts of the media find it easier to equate problems with immigration when the reality is not so simple. Sadly some political parties too think peddling myths are a better way to get votes than discussing facts.

The survey found that almost two-thirds (59%) of people know no one who had worked in the EU. Less than a quarter (24%) of people said had actually experienced immigration impact them personally. Misunderstanding is clearly fuelled when people only have myths to base their views on, rather than personal experience.

And so, when I outlined facts about the true extent immigration had on our health service, social housing

and our benefits system some people were surprised.

This finding reinforces to me the need to take a firm stance with those peddling myths about immigration.

Successive Governments have not been open enough about immigration. It must be a key priority of Government and politicians to be honest, admit mistakes and circulate the facts.



4. The existing government policy is not working

Reviewing the survey responses and thoughts from the workshops demonstrated that the Government's existing policies must change.

The survey found that eighty-four per cent (84%) of constituents believe the Government's flagship policy - a fixed cap on the number of people moving to the UK from outside the EU - is not working.

A fixed cap discourages many talented people, who could make a real contribution to our economy, to move here.

Seven out of ten people (71%) also agree that the inclusion of international students within the cap is ridiculous. A number of constituents were vocal in recognising that international students benefitted the local economy. This is supported by a letter I also recently received from Birmingham City University.

Professor Clive Allen, Vice-Chancellor Birmingham City University

"[A cap on international students is a] is a serious threat to student recruitment facing universities in Birmingham."

Mixing with UK students was also viewed as key for boosting cultural understanding and knowledge as well as strengthening the UK's global standing.

Immigration Mythbuster

EU migrants coming to the UK looking for work cannot claim out of work benefits unless they have been in the UK for more than 3 months and passed a Habitual Residence Test.

Migrants pay more in taxes than they claim in benefits, providing a net contribution of more than £25 billion.

In 2013, around 0.3% of Child Benefit payments were awarded to families in UK with children residing outside the UK.

As of February 2014, 3.2% of EU migrants claim unemployment benefits. The rest are working, studying or supporting themselves.

Immigrants do not qualify for free health care unless they are given permanent residence or the UK has reciprocal arrangements with their country or countries of origin. So called "health tourism" in reality costs 0.06% of the NHS budget.

Foreign nationals who arrived in the past two years make up 0.6% of all people living in social housing in the UK.

The statistics above are based on the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Migration Statistics Quarterly Reports August 2009, 2010 and 2014, to see these reports please visit: <http://ow.ly/l6h3m>. Further information relating to 'NHS tourism' can be found here: <http://ow.ly/l6bLO>.

It is important the UK maintains its reputation as a world leader for Higher Education and welcomes more international students here to study.

Survey Respondent

“Communication is a struggle. English is a must, so we can communicate and understand each other.”

Language too, was repeatedly raised in survey comments and during the workshops. Many recognise it is a barrier to integration and effective immigration, more must be done.

Survey Respondent

“We are a safe and hard-working country and I believe we should continue to be a safe place for genuinely endangered refugees.”

Contrary to what you sometimes read in the media, many people at the event also stated it is crucial to maintain Britain’s tradition of offering a safe haven to those genuinely fleeing torture and persecution. In my survey, fifty-eight per cent (58%) agreed we had a moral responsibility to protect those fleeing for their lives.

Of course this means a third of respondents disagreed. I firmly believe that Britain - along with all other countries - should fulfil our international responsibility to help others. After all, we would hope other countries would not look the other way if it happened to us. Public support should not be taken for granted. It’s something which needs to be talked through.

The workshop highlighted we had to assure that asylum claims were genuine and that decisions are made much more quickly. Attendees were shocked that fewer than a hundred Syrians have been provided asylum in the UK, despite the civil war displacing, by some estimates, five million people.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The survey highlighted a range of views, and the public meeting provided a challenging discussion but nevertheless an important one.

The concerns set out in the report outline why I support the immigration reforms put forward by Labour (right).

It is clear we need more openness to separate the facts from the myths. Government also needs to do a lot more to strengthen border controls and to enforce and improve laws on wages and hours.



Northfield Talks: Immigration Proposals

1. Strengthen Britain’s border controls. **Introduce new border checks and visa enforcement** to tackle illegal immigration, stop abuse and manage migration levels.
2. To deal with employers undercutting wages by taking on cheap migrant workers, the Government must **enforce a higher minimum/ living wage and increase fines for breaching the minimum wage.**
3. The Government must **ban agencies who only advertise abroad**, and require companies who take on non-EU workers to **create apprenticeships for UK people.**
4. **Introduce a smarter system for different kinds of immigration** to welcome more overseas University students who bring in billions.
5. Make sure people who come to this country learn English - so we celebrate our diversity and unite communities. It must be a **requirement for all publicly funded, public facing workers to speak English.**
6. **The Government’s spousal visa system, which was introduced without a full consultation, should be reviewed.**
7. The Government should extend the period **EU migrants must be in the UK before claiming out of work benefits to two years.**

This report will also be submitted to the UK Government asking them to review their current policies.