

# Best intentions: EU migrant workers in Fenland

A survey

Jonathan Thomas

**SMF**

Social Market  
Foundation

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A survey

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Thomas

Jonathan has been the Migration Researcher at the SMF since the beginning of 2018. After studying History at Oxford and Law at Nottingham, Jonathan worked for over two decades as a senior legal professional in the City of London, before completing an Immigration Law LLM and turning his attention full-time to analysing the opportunities and challenges for the UK that are presented by the many aspects of international migration.

## FOREWORD

Few topics have generated as much political and public debate as immigration. Although other issues have recently topped the agenda, the history of British politics and policy in the early-Twenty-first Century will surely give immigration a prominent role.

Yet for all the comment and argument, much is missing from the British immigration debate. The voices of immigrants themselves are too rarely heard, an omission that points to a bigger, more significant oversight: evidence. Too often, people involved in or just interested in the policy and politics of immigration depend on assertions and claims rather than facts.

That was the starting point for this project. Some people, including some who campaign for – and claim to speak for – EU migrants in the UK argue that recent political events and policy developments have made the country unwelcoming and unattractive to EU citizens. Some people on the other side of the debate might even hope that this is true.

The Social Market Foundation has its views on immigration: we believe that, supported by the right policies, an open approach to immigration can deliver economic and social benefits. But before our views comes the evidence. Our work is always based on facts, so we set out to gather facts about the low-wage EU migrants who are so often the object of debate.

The evidence here should give pause to those who argue about immigration at Westminster and its social media antechambers. The migrants themselves are paying very little attention to the events and issues that so animate people on both sides of the debate. Instead, they are getting on with their lives and jobs, making plans based on what is best for their families and basing decisions on what they hear from friends and colleagues.

The findings of this report, especially with regard to awareness of the EU Settlement Scheme, should be considered carefully by everyone interested in migration policy, whatever their prior views. It is undeniably true that immigration is important, which is why migration policy should be based on facts, not supposition.

**James Kirkup, Director, Social Market Foundation**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Much time and ink has been spent surmising and attributing reactions and intentions to EU workers in the UK in light of the UK's vote to leave the EU and decision to end EU Freedom of Movement. But for lower-skilled EU workers, those whose future is arguably most impacted by these developments, some fundamental questions have been inadequately explored: what do they think about these developments and how are they reacting to them?

This report is based on the results of survey interviews conducted with mostly lower-skilled EU migrants using the Rosmini Centre, a community and advice centre for migrants in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, sometimes called the capital of the Fenland.

The vast majority of the 90 interviewees live in the PE13 postcode, which includes Wisbech and villages to the west. This area is within the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK, and in the bottom 20% in terms of income.<sup>1</sup> It is part of the Fenland local authority area, which had a 71.4% Leave vote in the 2016 EU Referendum.

29% of interviewees were Lithuanian. 26% were Romanian. 24% were Bulgarian. 14% were other EU nationalities, and the remaining 7% were non-EU migrants.

### Key findings

#### **1. There is no evidence of a Brexitodus of lower-skilled EU migrants, who pay relatively little attention to UK politics and policy.**

Major events in UK politics and immigration policy, such as the Brexit vote, the end of EU Freedom of Movement rules and the 2019 General Election result appear to have had no significant effect on the decisions of the EU migrants in the Survey about whether to stay in the UK or to leave. In fact, almost 40% said they intended to stay in the UK for longer than they had planned on arrival. And, with just one exception, the rest said their plans were unchanged.

Interviewees almost universally said their decisions about staying or leaving were based on financial and family opportunities and concerns. Those intending to stay were asked what might make them change their mind and leave. Only 12% said immigration status issues. The most common factors named were family issues and lack of work. Nearly a third of the group intending to stay said nothing could make them leave.

In terms of their stated likelihood of staying in the UK, no more than 10% of interviewees said that any of the major events in UK politics and immigration policy had made it any less likely that they would stay in the UK.

#### **2. Corroboration of how and why official immigration figures have been undercounting some groups of long-term international migrants.**

Some 10% of the interviewees said that when they arrived in the UK, they initially intended to stay for less than a year but had subsequently decided to stay for longer. Under the international definition used by the UK's immigration statistics, the International Passenger Survey that has been used to count migration into/out of the UK would have classified those migrants as 'short-term migrants' based on their initial intention of how long they were going to stay, even though they decided to stay longer and therefore turned out to be 'long-term migrants'.

It is of course possible that such undercounting of long-term migrants could be off-set by migrants who arrive intending to stay long-term but who then leave after less than a year.

However, the Survey found no interviewees who fit that description, and therefore no such offsetting effect.

**3. The EU Settlement Scheme is still unknown to many migrants, and poorly understood by users.**

Barely half of interviewees were aware of the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS). Even among those intending to stay in the UK past the cut off point for applying to the Scheme, over 40% said they were unaware of it.

Neither Government communication nor media reporting is a major source of information about the EUSS for the interviewees. Only 7% said they got information about the EUSS from those sources. Most relied on friends (39%), family (20%) and colleagues or employers (18%) for information on immigration rules.

Migrants using the EUSS largely think it is fair. Asked to rate its fairness on a scale of one to ten, users gave an average of 7.25. However, asked how easy the scheme is to use, they gave an average rating of only 4.9.

Evidence also suggests that there is an understandable presumption among a number of EU migrants who are being granted 'pre-settled status' that their transition to 'settled status' in the UK will be automatically granted after five years residence here. But this is not currently how the EUSS is designed to work. Rather, settled status is something that those with pre-settled status will need to pro-actively apply for, with further evidential requirements, once they are eligible. This lack of awareness could become a serious problem in the future for EU migrants granted only pre-settled status now.

**4. Even a number of longstanding migrants still struggle with English.**

57.5% of interviewees needed interpreter assistance to understand and answer the two-page survey. Among interviewees who had been in the UK the longest, at over 10 years, 75% of them still made use of an interpreter in completing the Survey.

The number of migrants needing interpreter assistance to complete the Survey, even after having been working in the UK for some considerable time, suggests that the challenges for the acquisition of English language skills amongst groups of European co-nationals living and working together remain formidable. This may point to the need for greater engagement with employers on this issue, and some form of in-working hours language provision.



## CHAPTER 1 - DETAILS OF THE SURVEY

The Survey consisted of 90 one-to-one short interviews conducted with migrants who attended the Rosmini Centre in Wisbech in Fenland over the period 28 January 2020 - 23 March 2020.

The Rosmini Centre is a community centre which provides a number of services; migrants from the local area can visit it to receive information, advice and guidance from staff fluent in a number of different languages who are able to provide migrants with support on employment, accommodation and other issues relevant to their wellbeing including signposting to other service providers. The Centre's services for migrants are mainly, but not exclusively, aimed at those migrants from Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, as these countries have been the source of the vast majority of the inflow into the local area over the last fifteen years.

The migrants who were interviewees for the Survey were exclusively working in what the UK Government would classify as lower-skilled occupations,<sup>2</sup> although a handful were either unemployed or were past working age. Interviewees were not specifically selected for interview, but rather those who came into the Centre during the survey period to access its services and were asked if they would also be willing to be interviewed and complete a short questionnaire (with or without the help of an interpreter).

In addition, an effort was made to seek a spread of:

1. **Ages** - interviewees were aged from 19 to 86.
2. **Length of time spent in the UK** - interviewees ranged from those newly arrived within the past month to those who had been here for 15 years.
3. **Nationalities** - despite the preponderance of nationalities from certain parts of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, 13 different nationalities were represented amongst the interviewees.
4. **Reasons for coming to the Centre on that visit** - although understandably in this period an increasing number of those attending the Centre were doing so in order to obtain advice and assistance on the EUSS, still over half of the interviewees to the Survey were visiting the Centre for other reasons.

The completed questionnaires captured:

1. The basic details of the migrant and their situation: age, nationality, occupation, length of stay in UK.
2. Their current leave/stay intentions, what was primarily driving these, how these might have changed over time, and in particular whether these had been impacted by:
  - a. the result of the EU Referendum in the UK;
  - b. the end of EU Freedom of Movement to the UK;
  - c. the terms of the EU Settlement Scheme under which EU citizens are permitted to stay in the UK after Brexit;
  - d. the December 2019 General Election result in the UK.
3. Their level of awareness of the EU Settlement Scheme, their perceptions of the unfairness/fairness of the terms of the EUSS and of the difficulty/ease of its application process, as well as their main source of information about it.

What inspired the survey?

### **Some key questions and perspectives at the heart of the Brexit settlement for EU migrant workers**

As part of the terms of the UK's departure from the EU, the Brexit settlement for EU citizens already living in the UK, or indeed who come to the UK before the end of 2020, is set out by the UK Government in the EU Settlement Scheme.<sup>3</sup> This allows these EU citizens to make an application for settled status in the UK, which provides them with the right to stay in the UK permanently.

This has given rise to a number of important questions. The Survey was inspired by three of them:

- Is there – or will there be - a ‘Brexodus’ – are significant numbers of EU citizens intending to leave the UK as a direct result of Brexit?
- What is most influencing EU migrants’ decisions on whether to stay in or leave the UK?
- What is the risk that some of these migrants will not be aware of the requirements of the EU Settlement Scheme and as a result will remain in the UK with insecure immigration status?

These questions have elicited much comment since the EU Referendum, but the Survey was inspired by two aspects of the questions:

- First, that these questions would seem to give rise to answers and explanations that are more complex, conflicting and contested than much of the comment has admitted<sup>4</sup>; and
- Second, ‘lower-skilled’ EU migrants are arguably the cohort most impacted by Brexit and the settled status process, in some senses having the most to lose and in other senses the most to gain. Yet their own perspectives and thoughts on this do not seem to have been much sought out. The timing of the Survey was designed to capture how these perspectives and thoughts may be reflected in their action now, given that the end of the period for applying for settled status under the EUSS is fast approaching.

Brexit and the EU Settlement Scheme: complexity, conflict and contestation

#### **On the one hand – the ‘Brexodus’ risk**

The risk and reality of a ‘Brexodus’ has been the subject of much comment since the EU Referendum. The key concerns have been not just over EU citizens’ feeling of uncertainty over their future status in the UK, but also over their feeling at worst threatened by overt hostility, at best undervalued, reduced to mere pawns in a negotiating process between the UK and the EU.<sup>5</sup>

Such concerns seem all the more heightened in the case of lower-skilled EU migrants, as through the different proposed iterations of the UK Government’s new post-Brexit immigration regime, from the Government’s initial 2018 proposal: “The UK’s future skills-based immigration system”<sup>6</sup> to its finally realised 2020 incarnation: “The UK’s points-based immigration system”,<sup>7</sup> it has been clear throughout that it is lower-skilled immigration from the EU that is to be the main target of the Government’s increased immigration restrictions and intended reductions in immigrant numbers going forward. So if anyone should be left feeling particularly uncertain, undervalued and unwanted, it is this cohort of EU migrants.

Added to this, this cohort looks to have more options than their forebears. When the previous free movement path to the UK, from the Commonwealth, was closed off in the 1960s, many of those migrants who had used it stayed, and indeed cemented their foundations here, rather than return to countries whose economic potential was viewed as significantly below that of the UK. But for EU citizens in the UK today, the relative economic factors playing into a decision on where to live and work, between the UK and their home country, or indeed between the UK and other EU countries where they can still exercise free movement rights, may seem much less clearcut.

And this is the impression given by UK users of such labour. Their understandable concern about how they might be able to lawfully engage overseas workers post-Brexit has seemingly merged into an escalating concern about the intentions of those lower-skilled EU workers already in the UK whom they do have access to. According to the Association of Labour Providers, “56% of labour providers said they are expecting more than 20% of their non-UK EU nationals to leave the UK permanently this year up 10% from the last survey. 17% said this figure could be over 40%.”<sup>8</sup>

The ‘Brexodus’ mantra has also received support from the official immigration statistics. Net immigration from the EU has dropped off significantly since the EU Referendum. While the main contribution to this decline has been fewer numbers of EU citizens arriving for work, now at their lowest level for 15 years, also apparent has been a gradual increase in the numbers of those leaving.<sup>9</sup>

### **On the other hand – an opportunity like no other?**

It is not at all obvious why lower-skilled EU migrants would want to leave the UK now. For this cohort the offer to them to stay permanently in the UK under the terms of the EU Settlement Scheme is a window of opportunity which is not likely to be repeated any time soon. Once it has closed, future lower-skilled EU migrants to the UK will be restricted in their ability to come here to work by the much stricter parameters of the new immigration regime.

And even if they can come, their path to any form of permanent status here will be much more challenging. Indeed, in what it requires in order to secure permanent status in the UK, the EUSS can be thought of as relatively generous. The eligibility and evidential requirements to successfully achieve permanent status under the EUSS are significantly more flexible and generous than under the EU Freedom of Movement regime. And the long grace period means that although June 2016 now seems a lifetime ago, new EU migrants can still avail themselves of the opportunity to get on the path to permanent settlement which the EUSS provides, as long as they arrive in the UK before the end of 2020.<sup>10</sup>

A closer look at the statistics seems hard to square with the idea of a Brexodus. While the numbers do show increasing numbers of EU citizens leaving the UK, and an even greater drop off in numbers of those arriving, it is important to remember that the statistics are still consistently showing more long-term EU migrants arriving in the UK than are leaving. In other words, post-Brexit, and pre-COVID-19 at least, net long-term immigration into the UK from the EU continued.<sup>11</sup>

Drilling down further, some patterns have emerged; a loss of Poles and a continued gain of Romanians and Bulgarians. But even that seems far from clear-cut. While the ONS migration statistics continue to show net emigration of Poles from the UK, the ONS UK Labour Force Survey seems more recently to suggest (pre-COVID 19 at least) a Polish ‘bounce-back’. This would suggest that departures from the UK are less Brexodus-related, in the sense of a reaction to feelings of uncertainty and to experiences of being made unwelcome, as it is hard to understand why these factors would differentially affect different nationalities from the same region. There is an argument that this is instead more related to country-specific issues: “The interruption to trend Pole-wise just seems rather more likely to reflect changes in the Polish economy than

anything else. For example, the decline of Polish workers was very much associated with the strengthening of the Zloty against the pound, and that decline largely halted when it stopped strengthening (and since then the Zloty has trended gently downwards as the Polish worker decline gently reversed)".<sup>12</sup>

When one looks at the path to permanent status in the UK, rather than merely migrant flows, one sees that even prior to the introduction of the EU Settlement Scheme, and albeit from a low base, post the EU Referendum there was a significant spike upwards in the numbers of EU citizens applying for British citizenship.<sup>13</sup> And the take-up of the EU Settlement Scheme seems to have been very high amongst some nationalities in particular. Indeed five nationalities appear to have an application rate in excess of their estimated entire population in the UK, the Bulgarians leading the way with an application rate of over 150% of the estimated number of Bulgarians here.<sup>14</sup>

So this is why we say that the answers and explanations in this area may be more complex, conflicting and contested than may be commonly assumed.

### **The third limb**

While it may be true that through the EU Settlement Scheme app the UK Government "has made it as simple and straightforward as possible ... to obtain a UK immigration status: [EU citizens] will just need to prove their identity, confirm their UK residence and declare any criminal convictions",<sup>15</sup> there is still the requirement on the part of EU citizens in the UK to take positive action in order to obtain settled status to lawfully stay in the UK. And notwithstanding the robust looking figures for both applications and grants of status, there is broad consensus that a number of EU citizens in the UK will likely not successfully apply under the EUSS, or indeed be sufficiently aware to engage with it at all.

And on the face of it this will have significant consequences. Whereas those EU citizens who successfully apply under the EUSS will maintain their entitlements to work, study, and to access public services and benefits in the UK, those who do not will not. They will in effect fall into irregular status; their ability to work, to be housed - to in practice live - in the UK consequently potentially severely impaired and impacted. They can be removed from the country.

This has led to suggestions that the outcome of the EU Settlement Scheme could be 'Windrush on steroids', in terms of the potential numbers impacted and the severity of the impact they could face. And that this could potentially be addressed by instead making the EU Settlement Scheme declaratory of immigration status, with the registration process only serving to furnish proof of that status. But at the same time the motivations of the Government in structuring the EU Settlement Scheme as they have are at least partly due to their concerns that the problems with the Windrush scheme ultimately arose from its declaratory nature, compounded by the fact that in that case proof of status only became an issue many years later.<sup>16</sup>

There is also a concern about the concept of pre-settled status. On the one hand it is a path to settled status which appears to leave all the cards in the hands of the migrant; as long as they remain in the UK they can subsequently upgrade to settled status. But under the EU Settlement Scheme as currently structured, this upgrade is not automatic; they will need to actually play their hand when their time comes. And unlike the EU Settlement Scheme which at least has the same timelines and deadlines for all, the chance to convert from pre-settled to settled status will arise at a different point for each EU citizen in the UK, depending when their five-year period of continuous residence here is reached. While the Home Office have stated their intent to send a personal reminder to each such person before their five-year limited leave to remain period under pre-settled status expires,<sup>17</sup> there is understandable concern about how this will work in practice. And of the level of awareness and understanding of those going through the EUSS and receiving

pre-settled status of what they will subsequently need to do to obtain full settled status. This concern has combined with a suggestion that more EU citizens may be being granted pre-settled (as opposed to settled) status than one would expect, although given the data challenges relating to EU citizens in the UK it is hard to be sure whether or not this is the case.<sup>18</sup>

### Why Fenland for this survey?

There are a number of features of Fenland which make it a particularly attractive place to carry out the Survey. It presents a microcosm of the challenges and opportunities that EU Freedom of Movement of lower-skilled workers has brought to the UK.

It is an area that has seen a greatly increased number of migrant residents since the turn of the millennium; compared to the UK average the area has a higher percentage of migrants who have been UK resident for five years or less,<sup>19</sup> the cut-off between pre-settled and settled status eligibility under the EU Settlement Scheme. But at the same time, like many of the other non-urban areas of the UK that have seen a more recent influx of European workers, Fenland has had less longer-term experience of material international immigration, and indeed still overall has a lower proportion of non-UK born residents than the UK average.<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly the overall migrant worker data for Fenland indicates more female than male migrants living in the area and accessing the Rosmini Centre, although the opposite is true in the 18-30 age bracket.<sup>21</sup> In terms of the interviewees for the Survey, 52% were male, 48% female.

Another feature of the Fenland area is that many of the European migrants work in so-called lower-skilled occupations and many are employed through labour providing agencies. The migrant workforce in Fenland has traditionally experienced high rates of employment and long hours in the horticulture, agriculture, food packing and processing industries. As a result, there were very low levels of self-employment reported there at the time of the Survey, and indeed only one interviewee for the Survey identified as self-employed. But because of the nature of the work in the area, pay levels are generally low. The PE13 postcode, where 9 out of every 10 of the Survey interviewees live, is within the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK, and in the bottom 20% in terms of income.<sup>22</sup>

Fenland's contribution to the EU Referendum vote was a 71.4% Leave vote on a 73.7% turnout,<sup>23</sup> so it is on the face of it potentially fertile ground for testing how migrants' perception of recent political developments, and any feelings of uncertainty and being unwelcome that may have resulted from them, may be impacting their choices: is there any evidence that living among Leave voters makes any difference to EU migrants' decisions? Previous data has indicated high levels of EU migrants in the area stating an intention to remain permanently in the UK,<sup>24</sup> so it would be interesting to see if there were any evidence that recent events in the UK had impacted on those intentions.

The other major attraction of Fenland for the Survey is the existence of the Rosmini Centre in Wisbech, as the Centre can provide access to a cross-section of lower-skilled European migrants who would otherwise be hard to reach. And also to trusted advisers, fluent in the languages of those migrants, who could administer the interviews for the Survey. What is more the Centre had very recent experience of both sponsoring and being part of primary migration research in the area,<sup>25</sup> and, alongside its core role in providing important services to the migrant community, is also interested in contributing to research and greater understanding of key issues relating to migration in the area.

## CHAPTER 2 - FINDINGS OF THE SURVEY

### First a caveat

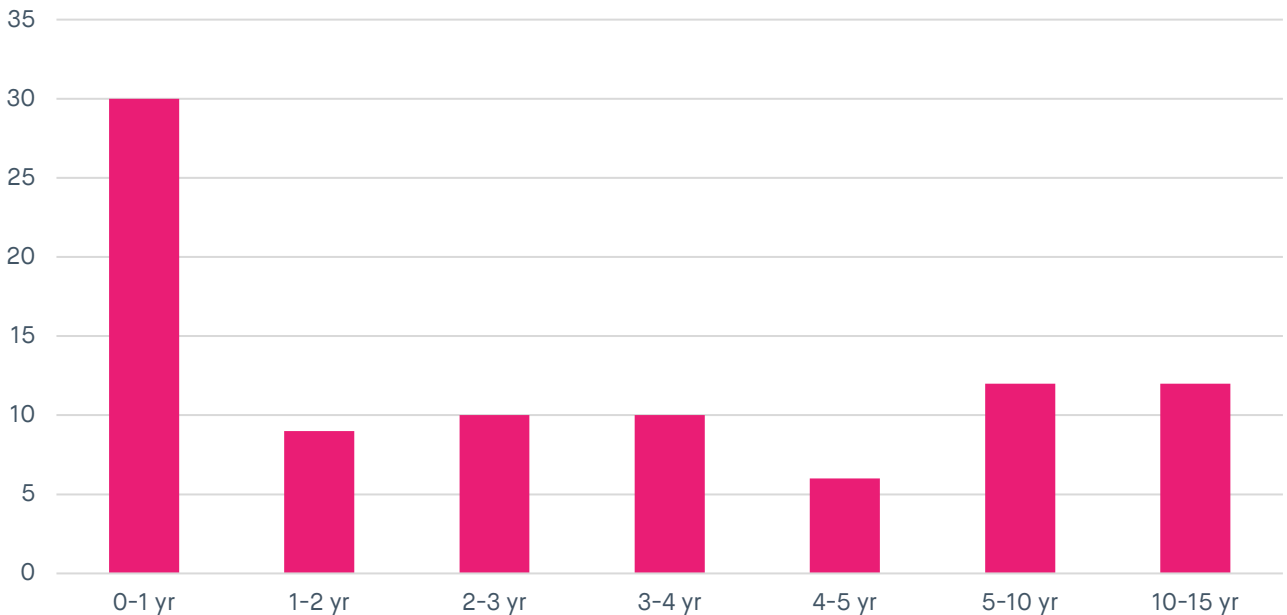
Of course it could be argued that conducting this Survey three and a half years after the EU Referendum is likely to skew the sample to feedback that is more positive on the case for staying in the UK, on the basis that most of those most migrants dissatisfied with the post-Brexit landscape may have already departed. And also that those deciding to visit the Rosmini Centre for advice and assistance are likely to be doing so for reasons related to staying in the UK; those who depart do not necessarily need their advice and assistance.

But on the other hand it could also be argued that only now, now that the time has come for EU citizens in the UK to decide definitively what action to take regarding their status here, that by *their action* will be revealed what they actually think and what they intend to do. Which might be quite different from any earlier reactions or intentions they might have had, or indeed from the reactions or intentions ascribed to them by others.

### They (still) keep on coming

The Survey confirmed significant numbers of EU citizens continue to come to the UK, some intending to do so for short periods, some for longer, some for good. The sample set for the Survey was controlled so as to seek a spread of those coming to the Centre in terms of their situation and advice and assistance sought, and not just those newly arrived in the country coming into the Centre who are generally looking for initial advice and assistance on obtaining a National Insurance number and other set up issues. This was done in order to achieve a fairer reflection of the makeup and breadth of the local migrant population and their attitudes. Nevertheless, still nearly 60% of the interviewees to the Survey had arrived in the UK *after* the date of the EU Referendum.

**Figure 1: Number of interviewees - by length of time in the UK**

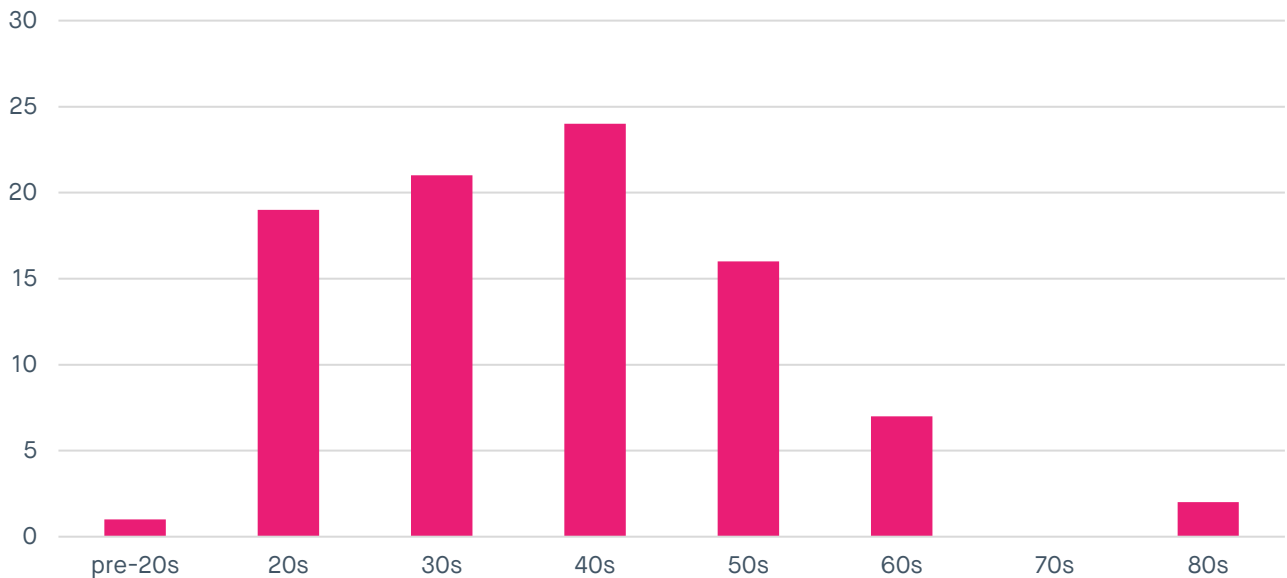


Source: SMF

(It's not all about) the young folks

The standard image of a recent EU migrant to the UK is of a young, single, worker, but the age distribution of the interviewees to the Survey was considerable.

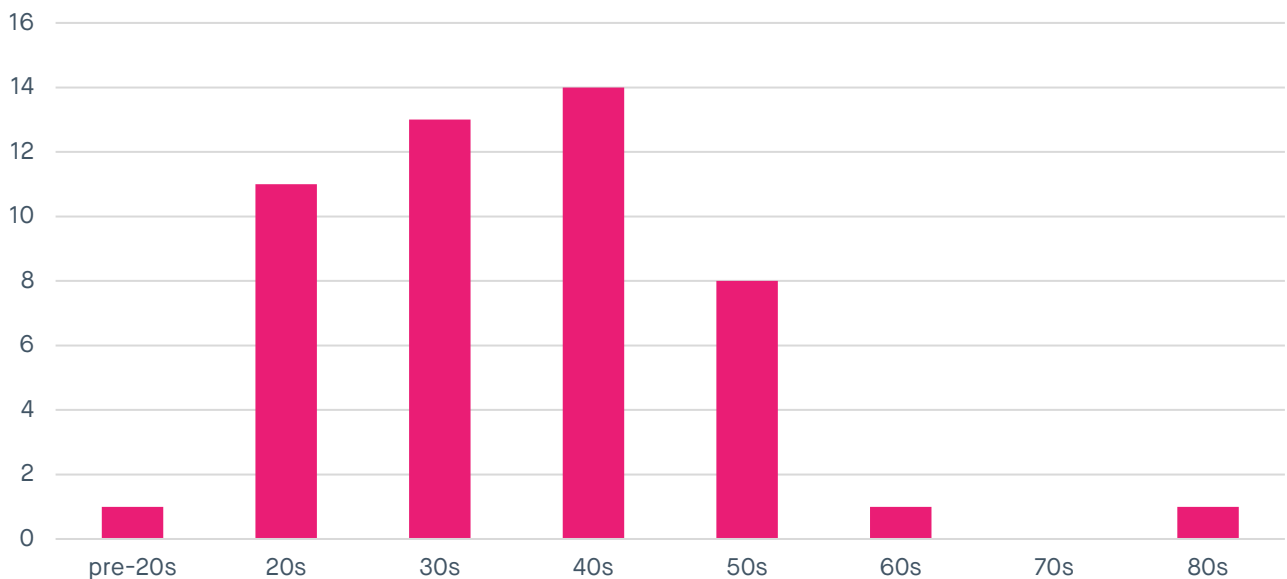
**Figure 2: Age distribution of interviewees**



Source: SMF

Of course, it is to be expected that over time there will be an “emerging population of ageing Central and Eastern European migrants who have settled in the UK”.<sup>26</sup> But perhaps more surprising is the significant age distribution seen even amongst more recent arrivals.

**Figure 3: Age distribution of interviewees arriving in the UK in the last 3 years**



Source: SMF



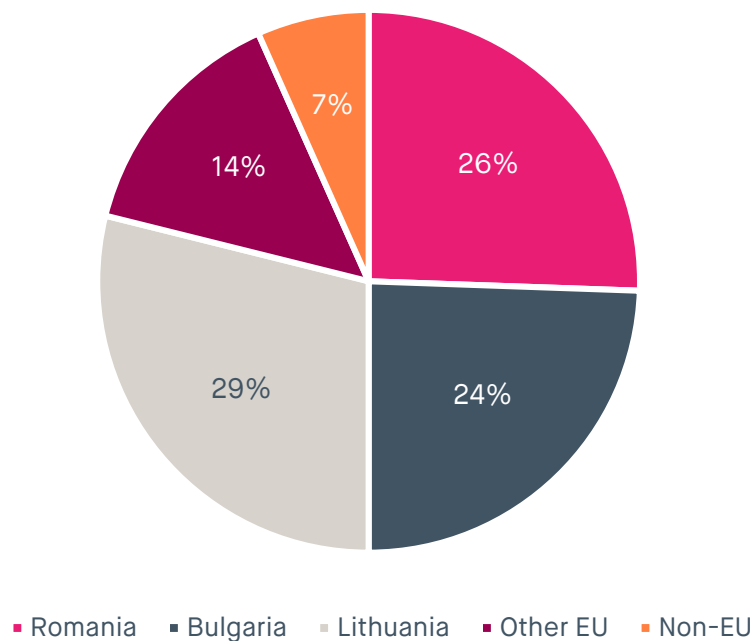
One recent arrival in their fifties explained that they had felt freed up to come now that their children had grown up. There is a perception amongst employers and labour providers in the area that the skillset of more recent migrant arrivals coming into the area has been changing and it may be that a greater age distribution of those arriving is part of that phenomenon.<sup>27</sup>

At the other extreme, destined to be an increasing group as they come into the jobs market, regardless of the direction of immigration policy in the UK, are those who are still very young but have already been in the UK a considerable time because they came here with their parents when they were of school age. One interviewee in the Survey had been in the UK for 10 years despite only now being 20.

### The mother tongue

13 different nationalities were represented amongst the interviewees of the Survey, but nearly four fifths of the interviewees were made up of just 3 nationalities: Lithuanian, Romanian and Bulgarian. The remainder were made up of other EU citizens: Greek, Polish, Hungarian, Latvian and Slovakian, and also 6 non-EU citizens (who are eligible for the EU Settlement Scheme if they are a family member or partner of an EU citizen).

**Figure 4: Nationality of interviewees**



Source: SMF

57.5% of interviewees for the Survey needed interpreter assistance to understand and answer the two-page Survey. It is important to stress that this may still cover a broad range of English ability – it could at one end encompass those with no ability at all in English through at the other end to those with the ability to understand and use some degree of English but who may have lacked the confidence to understand part of the Survey questions.

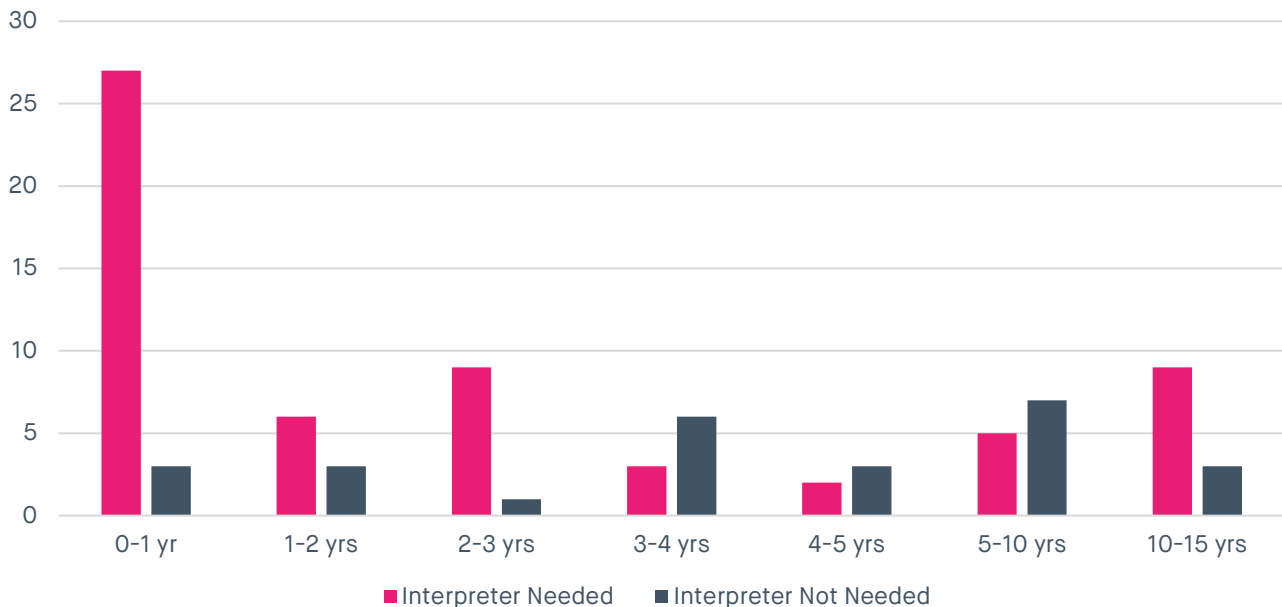
Varied English ability is not surprising in those most recently arrived. But even so there has been a sense amongst employers and labour providers in Fenland that they have seen declining English language skill levels in more recent arrivals, and increasing numbers of older migrants



whose English language proficiency is low.<sup>28</sup> And only 10% of those interviewees who had arrived in the past year were able to complete the Survey without the aid of an interpreter.

What may seem more surprising though is that the findings show that, for a number of migrants, the need for an interpreter can persist for many years. The result in the 2-3 year length of stay range was the same relative percentage split as in the 0-1 year range, and indeed of interviewees who had been in the UK the longest, at over 10 years, 75% of them still made use of an interpreter for completion of the Survey.

**Figure 5: Need for interpreter assistance to complete the Survey**



Source: SMF

Given the degree of social mixing that might be expected in the workplace, this may seem even more surprising given that only five of the interviewees, and only one of this longest staying group, were out of work at the time of the Survey. But in this regard work might also be part of the problem. Research in the area has suggested that long and unsocial working hours may contribute to migrant workers finding it hard to make the time to undertake formal language learning.<sup>29</sup>

There is nothing in the responses to the Survey though to suggest that the challenges of the English language adversely impact on these migrants' experience of being in the UK. Those who make use of an interpreter seem no less likely to say that they enjoy life in the UK and intend to stay. Indeed it seems that the impact of this may be felt more by the longer term residents of the area, who can become acutely aware of national and language-based groupings in the workplace and residential concentrations and the tendency of migrants to socialise with their co-nationals outside of the workplace.<sup>30</sup>

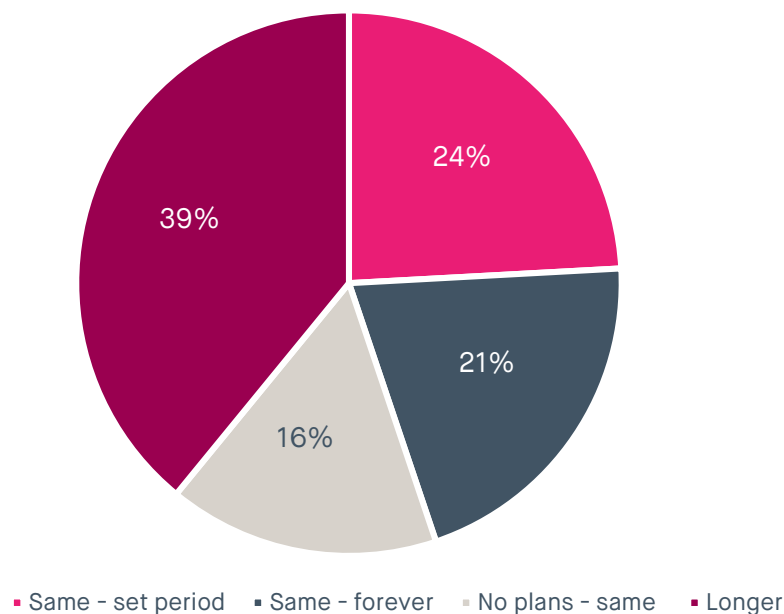
### Should I stay or should I go?

The interviewees for the Survey exhibited a spread of intentions as to their future in the UK, and indeed quite different degrees of clarity of intention. At one end are migrants who are very clear in what their intentions were when they arrived, either planning to stay for a specified period, or forever, and have not changed those intentions. At the other end are those who had no clear

intentions and still do not. And in the middle are those who may or may not have had clear intentions when they arrived but have now changed them.

In all the debate around the shape of the UK’s post-Brexit immigration policy, particularly in terms of the pros and cons of permanent versus temporary migration, it often seems forgotten that the EU Freedom of Movement regime, as its name suggests, is itself above all a regime of fluidity and flexibility – allowing for unfettered movement back and forth. It should not be surprising therefore that of the interviewees for the Survey only 1 in 5 came to the UK intending to make the UK their permanent home. A slightly higher percentage came to the UK intending to stay for a period before returning to their home country and have not changed that intention. But the highest percentage, almost 40% of interviewees, came under the banner of movement, planning to be in the UK for a period, but are now planning to stay longer, some even for good.

**Figure 6: Solid or shifting intentions?**



Source: SMF

This evidence of a significant number of migrants extending their stay in the UK beyond what they initially intended is significant in terms of the calculation of the UK’s official immigration statistics on the numbers of long-term migrants here. Because these statistics have until now been based on the International Passenger Survey (IPS), which asks people on arrival whether they intending to stay for at least a year. If they say ‘yes’ they are treated as a long-term international migrant (as defined by the UN as someone who moves country for at least a year). And if they say ‘no’ they are treated as a short-term international migrant. After much debate in recent years it has now been accepted that these official statistics have been significantly undercounting EU long-term migrants in the UK.<sup>31</sup>

The Survey provides a snapshot of how and why this undercounting can occur under the IPS counting mechanism. Some 10% of the interviewees to the Survey said they initially intended to stay for less than a year. On that basis, they would have been counted as ‘short-term international migrants’ under the IPS methodology and in the official statistics. However, they ended up changing their intentions and staying longer, meaning that they in fact turned out to be ‘long-term international migrants’. Of course, those changing their mind to stay for longer could be

offset by those who originally intended to stay for longer than a year but who changed their minds and instead stayed for under a year. But amongst the interviewees for this Survey there is no evidence of such a balancing effect. This potentially distorting effect in the UK's official immigration statistics due to migrants shifting intentions should be addressed by the evolution of the methodology for compiling the statistics away from the IPS and towards using Government administrative data. This evolution has been sped up by the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting suspension of the collecting of data through the IPS.<sup>32</sup>

Two reasons were overwhelmingly given by those interviewees who have now decided to stay in the UK for longer than they originally intended:

1. The ability to work/have a good job/earn good money; and
2. A better quality of life/opportunities for themselves and their families.

Typical responses included:

*“Ability to earn more money here, can bring children and they will have a better future.”*

*“I like the country and there are good jobs.”*

*“Because here you earn enough to live and have fun.”*

What comes across strongly, particularly in light of the perception of a narrowing of the economic differentials between the UK and certain parts of Central and Eastern Europe, is that in the eyes of the migrants in Fenland at least, these differentials still appear relatively stark: “Better money than Poland”.

The large majority of interviewees reported that they earned more than they needed to survive, and could earn enough to enjoy life in this country. This might reflect the findings of other research that more recent labour shortages have led employers to improve pay and conditions even as they have seen skill levels fall.<sup>33</sup>

And other than a single response which suggested that the level of wages was barely enough to live on, let alone to build up savings, there was otherwise no suggestion from interviewees that they felt they were the subject of exploitative working practices. In itself that of course does not mean that such practices do not exist in the area. But it might also be explained by the role of regulated labour providers and also the types of employers in the area which may mean that the risk of exploitative working practices here is being appropriately mitigated.

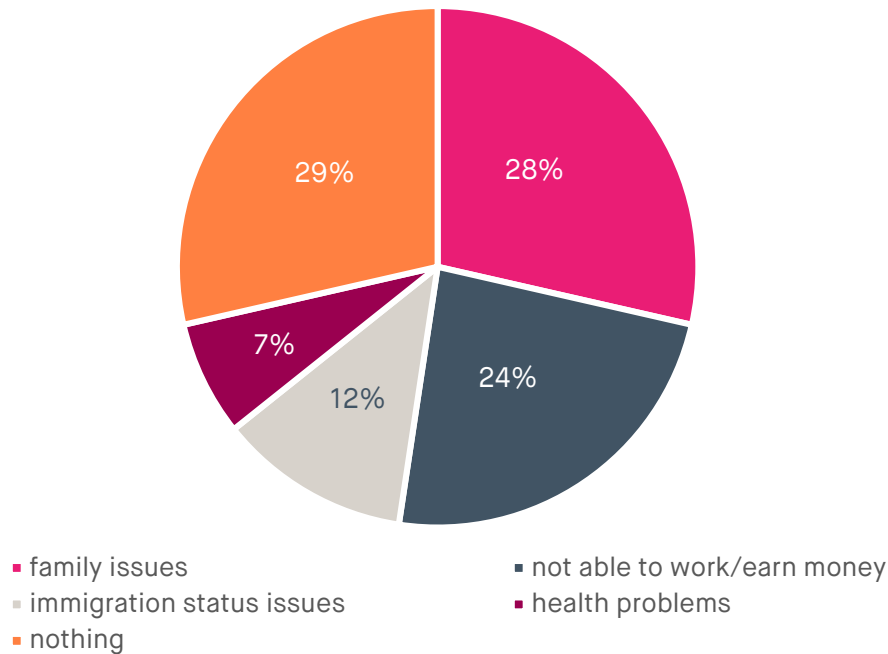
Indeed the overwhelming sense from interviewees was that the UK not only continues to be seen as an extremely attractive place to find a good job and earn money, but more broadly to build a better life, providing greater opportunities for the future than are available in their home country, not only for themselves, but also for their families.

There are three interviewees whose responses are not included in Figure 6, as they had specific responses, or situations, that were not shared by others. One is someone who came to the UK with his parents as a child so never himself made the choice to come. Another is someone who has been in the UK for eleven and a half years but now wishes to return for good in order to care for their elderly mother. This echoes something that was discussed in our recent report on assisted voluntary return of migrants; that just because someone has been in the UK for a longer period of time does not necessarily mean that they wish to settle here permanently.<sup>34</sup>

It also highlights the primacy of family considerations in migrant decision making about whether to stay in/ or leave the UK. On the one side those considerations are very evident in many migrants' reasons for deciding to extend their stay in this country. And on the other side the

importance of family is also evident in the responses to the Survey question that asked those interviewees who were intending to stay what it was that might make them leave. Alongside those who said that nothing would make them leave, family reasons was the most common response, usually related to family members left behind in the country of origin.

**Figure 7: (If you are intending to stay) what might make you leave?**



Source: SMF

In terms of the impact of family issues, where migrants have children with them in the UK this understandably seems to be a strong determinant of their intention to stay here as they see the opportunities that brings for their children. And where they have children but for whatever reason those children have not come with them to the UK, this can be a strong determinant of a weaker attachment to the UK and their intention to make their stay a temporary one, although of course that might be why they did not come with their children in the first place.

But the push and pull of family responsibilities do not always have clear outcomes. Where a migrant has significant family back in their home country, while there may be a strong potential pull back as a result of that, there can be other outcomes. For instance, while some EU workers leave the UK to return to care for older relatives, other EU workers who are settled here may bring over older family members to live with them in the UK, particularly to provide assistance with childcare.

What might make people change their minds and leave the UK? What the Survey did not find was any material sense that migrants viewed hostile attitudes or behaviours towards them as a potential factor in relevant decision-making. This would seem to align with recent research which has showed that:

- The spike in EU migrants’ perception of discrimination around the time of the EU Referendum was temporary and then dissipated.
- Migrants themselves are only half as likely to perceive discrimination as their adult children born in the UK.

- Nearly three quarters of migrants think that the UK is hospitable or welcoming for migrants.
- Over 90% of migrants think they can get ahead in the UK if they work hard.<sup>35</sup>

This does though take us back to Figure 6, and the third interviewee whose response is not reflected in that chart – because there was only one such response to this effect and it would therefore not have shown up on the chart. For out of the 90 interviewees for the Survey there was just one, a newly arrived migrant, who said that they had changed their intentions with the result that they now planned to stay in the UK for a *shorter* period of time. The reason given: “I am planning to get back home, I don’t like the situation here”.

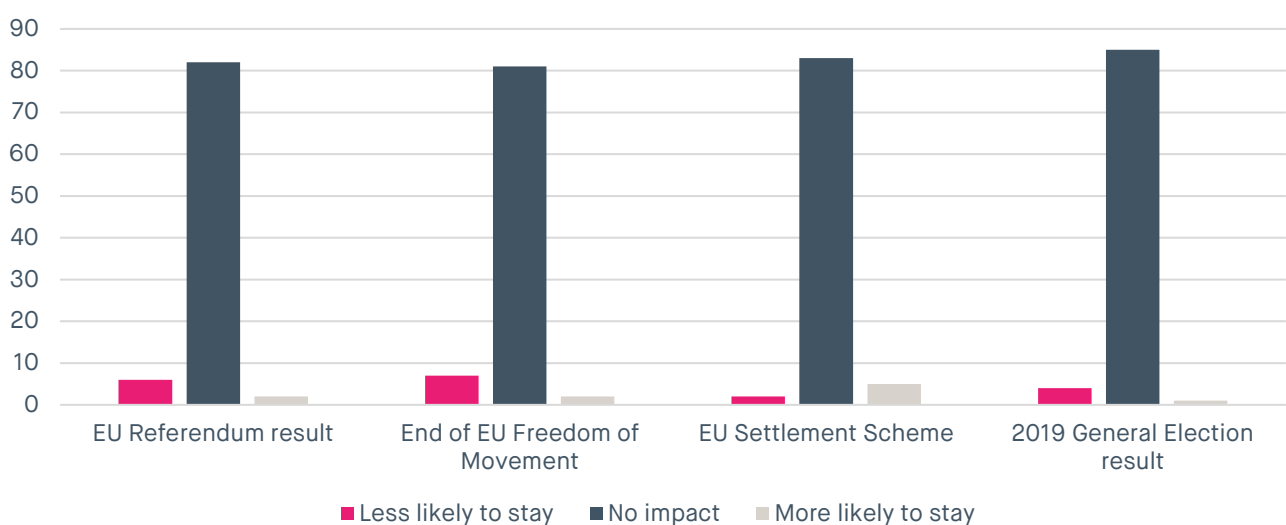
This is the one response that might suggest any sort of unease with the situation in the UK. But whether that feeling was the result of hostility experienced, or was simply a reaction to other aspects of life in the UK, it is not possible to tell. But it does lead us on to the findings on interviewees’ perceptions of recent political developments in the UK as they relate to the UK’s relationship with the EU and with EU citizens, and the impact these may have had on their own stay/leave intentions.

### Comfortably numb

Many words have been spoken and written about the impact on EU citizens in the UK of the EU Referendum result. That vote has seen the end of EU Freedom of Movement to the UK and a debate about the terms on which EU citizens already in the UK will be allowed to stay after Brexit. This has led to the requirement for them to have to apply through the UK Government’s EU Settlement Scheme to be able to do so.

But how do the cohort of lower-skilled EU migrants in Fenland perceive these developments, in terms of those developments’ impact on these migrants’ likelihood of staying in the UK? Broadly speaking, with equanimity. 90% or more said that those political events and policy decisions had had no impact on their likelihood of staying in the UK. The 2019 General Election result was similarly viewed as inconsequential.

**Figure 8: How, if at all, have the following changed your intention to stay in the UK?**



Source: SMF

Of note here are the group who said the terms of the EUSS on which they are allowed to stay in the UK after Brexit will make them *more* likely stay. More than half this (small) group also said that the EU Referendum vote, the ending of free movement into the UK, and the December 2019 General Election result had made them *less* likely to stay. The implication is that the perceived fairness of the terms of the EU Settlement Scheme could help convince some migrants to stay and possibly offset any deterrent effect those migrants feel from other UK political developments.

This takes us into the findings on migrants’ awareness of the EU Settlement Scheme, and their perceptions of its merits and failings.

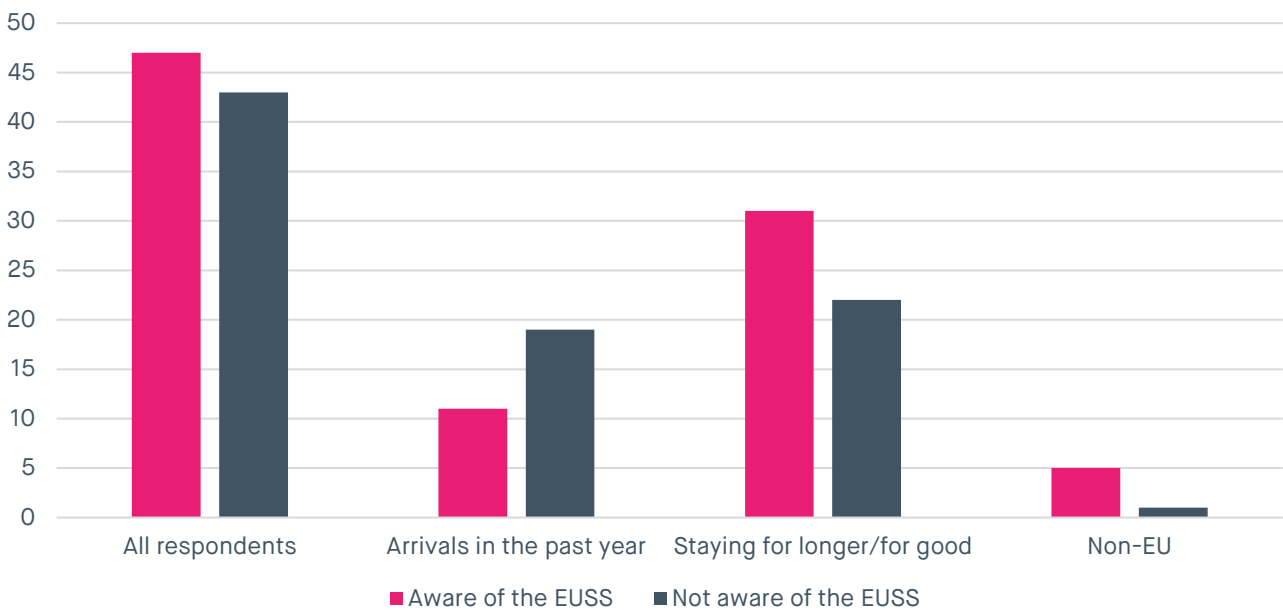
### Knowing me knowing EU

Worryingly, only a little over half of the interviewees to the Survey indicated that they were aware of the EU Settlement Scheme. And surprisingly, of those who had arrived in the past year awareness dropped, rather than rose, with only just over a third of those new arrivals saying they are aware of the Scheme.

And for those one might have expected to have the greatest level of awareness of the Scheme – those intending to stay in the UK permanently or to lengthen their stay, who would need to successfully apply to the Scheme in order to be able to lawfully do so – over 40% of said they were unaware of the Scheme.

Interestingly, albeit with a very small sample (6), awareness of the Scheme was by far the highest among non-EU migrants.

**Figure 9: Levels of awareness of the EU Settlement Scheme**

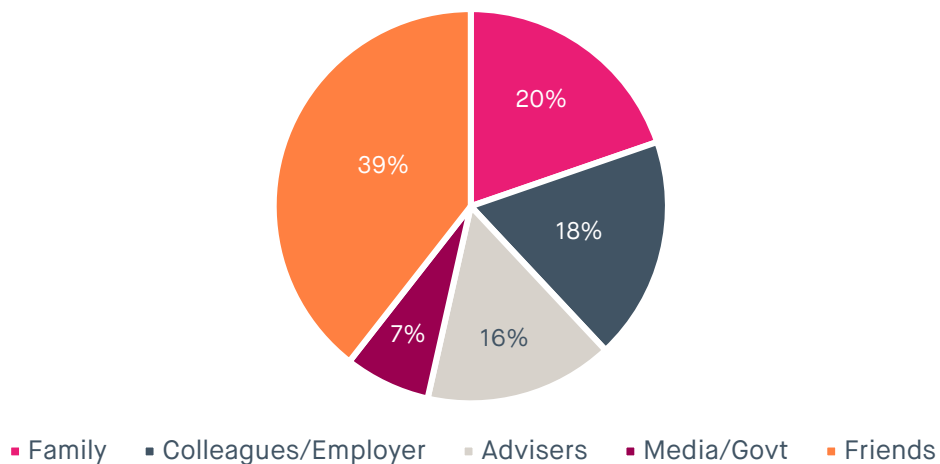


Less surprisingly it is clear that very few migrants are receiving information about the scheme directly from the official government sources, or even from the media. Previous research in the area has suggested the importance of migrant social networks as a major source of advice and assistance, and also that employers and labour agencies themselves have begun to assist their workers with the Scheme.<sup>36</sup> These suggestions are borne out by the findings of the Survey. It makes sense that those employers wishing to retain their existing EU workers pro-actively

provide information and assistance to those workers regarding the Scheme as their mutual interests in this regard would seem to be aligned.

Although migrants’ tight-knit co-national social networks may cause challenges in terms of integration with longer term residents in the area, one advantage may be seen in the finding that by far the main source of information on the Scheme is from friends. By contrast, among the small handful of non-EU migrants in the Survey, none reported getting their information on the Scheme from friends – presumably because they have less access to such networks, instead relying on family, advisers and the media. The reliance on friends for information may also help to explain why newly arrived-migrants have a lower level of awareness.

**Figure 10: Main source of information on the EUSS**

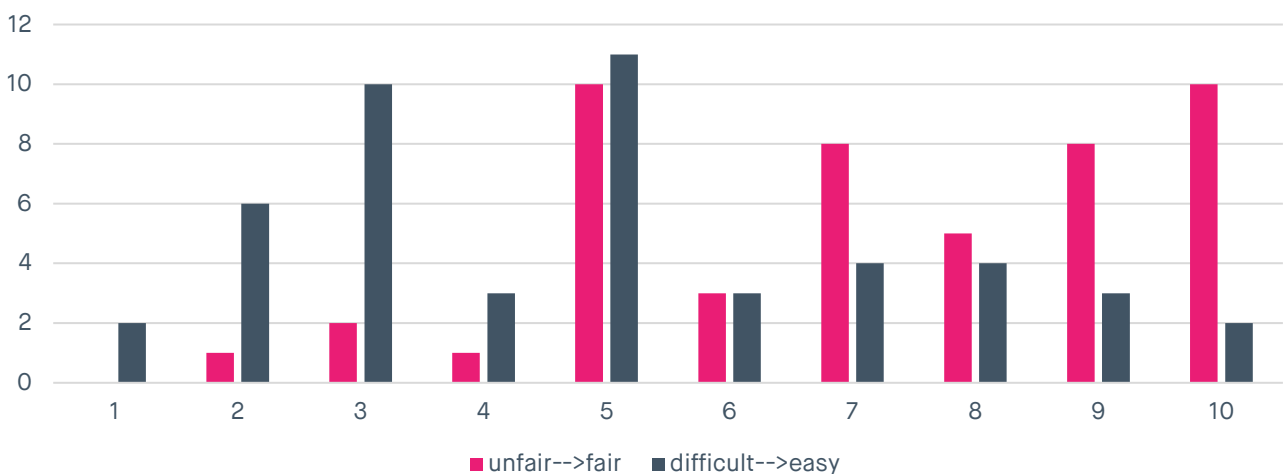


Source: SMF

### Easy (like Sunday morning)?

Each interviewee who felt sufficiently familiar with the EU Settlement Scheme was asked about their perception of both the fairness of the offer to stay in the UK under the terms of the EUSS, and of the difficulty/ease of applying under the EUSS, on a 1-10 scale, from very unfair to very fair and from very difficult to very easy.

**Figure 11: Number of migrants saying EUSS is (a) fair, and (b) easy, ranked 1-10**



Source: SMF

The key takeaway here is that those engaging with the EUSS seem to find its terms much fairer (average rating 7.25) than find the application process straightforward (average rating 4.9). There may of course be an element of self-selection here: people struggling with the EUSS application process are more likely to visit the Rosmini Centre for help with this or with other issues. But on the other hand those visiting the Centre also have the opportunity through the assistance they receive to conclude that the application process is perhaps not as difficult as they thought.

What also seems clear is that although awareness levels regarding the Scheme still seem concerningly low, for those who are aware, settled status is recognised as important. For those who said they were planning to stay in the UK, failure to achieve settled status was a reason that some interviewees gave for why they might leave.

Finally, while the Survey did not specifically seek to address the issue of pre-settled status, evidence from the Centre suggests that there is perhaps an understandable presumption among a number of EU migrants who are being granted pre-settled status that their transition to settled status in the UK will be automatically granted after five years residence here. But this is not currently how the EUSS is designed to work. Rather it is something that they will need to proactively apply for, with further evidential requirements. Lack of awareness of this suggests potential trouble ahead for this process.

#### Postscript: COVID-19

This Survey was carried out in the period immediately proceeding the widespread impact of COVID-19 and mitigation measures including the nationwide lockdown beginning in March 2020. We do not know how the crisis has impacted individual interviewees' personal and employment situation and what impact if any it may have had on their intentions.

What we do know is that the advent of the COVID-19 crisis understandably resulted in the Rosmini Centre seeing a drop off in the number of people seeking advice and assistance with making applications to the EU Settlement Scheme. At the same time though, the Home Secretary has confirmed that the Government currently have no intention of extending the deadline for application to the Scheme, which remains 30 June 2021. The Government also says it has still been providing support and accepting applications throughout the crisis.<sup>37</sup>



## CHAPTER 3 - CONCLUSION

The responses to the Survey both support pre-existing research and highlight issues around low-skilled migrants' decision-making that have received inadequate attention.

Some of the findings have potentially important ramifications for immigration and integration policy:

- **Information sources** - the Government clearly faces a continuing challenge in getting the message out to all EU citizens in the UK about the need to apply to the EU Settlement Scheme if they wish to lawfully stay in the UK, and in ensuring that those who are aware of the EUSS are sufficiently supported with advice and assistance to submit their application.
- **Awareness** - significant numbers of EU migrants are being granted pre-settled status. Yet few seem aware of the requirement to pro-actively upgrade this status at a later stage in order to continue to lawfully stay in the UK. This could become a significant problem in the near-term future.
- **Official data** - the Survey provides a snapshot of how and why the UK's official immigration statistics have been undercounting the long-term resident EU population in the UK. As the UK transitions from an intentions-based survey model to a model rooted in administrative data, the risk of undercounting based on intentions should be addressed. But 'intentions' based approaches also have their uses in managing immigration, particularly in terms of understanding migrants' patterns of movement and what motivates their decisions. As the basis of the immigration statistics evolves, this should not be forgotten.
- **Modelling** - much economic modelling of EU migrant workers' fiscal contribution or deficit to the UK public purse is based on various assumptions which generally assume as a starting benchmark a relatively young cohort with light family commitments.<sup>38</sup> The significant age range of Survey interviewees, including those who had arrived in most recent years, serves to remind us that the diversity of real-life experience can be a challenge for model assumptions.
- **Language** - the number of migrants needing interpreter assistance to complete the Survey, even after having been working in the UK for some considerable time, suggests that the challenges for the acquisition of English language skills amongst groups of European co-nationals living and working together remain formidable. This may point to the need for greater engagement with employers on this issue, and some form of in-working hours language provision.

Some of the other findings of the Survey serve as a timely reminder that many migrants do not necessarily think the way that immigration policymakers, or antagonists, or advocates, think (or hope) they do. The main concerns and challenges of immigration policy for those arguing over them may look very different from the perspective of migrants themselves. The choices those migrants make may be made on a very different basis.

- **Integration** - while the Survey questions did not explicitly delve into integration issues, some of the responses serve to remind that these issues may sometimes loom larger for longer term residents than for the migrants themselves. There was no obvious correlation between migrants' ability in the English language and those who said that they liked living in the UK or who felt they were taking advantage of the opportunities the UK offered.

- **Temporary** - there is a tendency among both anti- and pro-immigration camps in the UK to argue their case from the assumption that the UK is a permanent destination in the eyes of most international migrants. And, as a consequence, seeing any migrant departure as either a success, or a failure, of policy, depending which side of the debate they are on. But the Survey reminds that this is a very simplistic perspective. Of the interviewees, only 1 in 5 intended to stay permanently when they arrived in the UK. The fact that some leave is neither a success nor a failure of policy, but most frequently just the output of some very personal decision-factors, most often revolving around family.
- **Money** - in a country that – pre-COVID-19 at least – seemed increasingly concerned with ‘post-material issues’,<sup>39</sup> it can be easy to forget how important simpler, material issues: a good job, decent pay, a good education for one’s children, better prospects for one’s family, can be vital to those who cannot so easily access those things in their home country. These things may weigh much more substantially than political developments and their perceived fallout which so preoccupy those in the policy and advocacy world who spend their days tussling over immigration issues.
- **Reality** - the real-world decisions of migrants are not all about careful considerations and calculations around the finer points of the immigration rules. Nor are they reactions based on how others expect they should feel. This can be seen in interviewees’ approach to the EU Settlement Scheme. On the one hand, the Fenland cohort seem largely to consider the terms of the EUSS to be fair, not as a slight aimed at them. But, on the other hand, nor is there evidence that new arrivals in Fenland have been attracted by the EUSS, and the relatively clear path that it provides to permanent settlement in the UK and the long period post-EU Referendum that the Government has allowed to take advantage of this.

Overall, the lesson of the Survey is that much of the UK’s public debate about immigration policy inevitably misses the mark when it comes to migrants’ motivations of whether to stay or leave. Arguments among politicians and others in and around Westminster matter little. While policy must obviously be formulated at an impersonal level, individual migrants make their decisions on a deeply personal basis. They tend to get their information from friends and make decisions because of family.

Perhaps this is best summed up by the explanation of a young female interviewee, recently arrived in the UK and initially only planning on a six month stay, of why she had now decided to stay for longer: “I found a very welcoming group at the church and I fell in love”.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Greenfields, David Smith, Egle Dagilyte, with Semra Ramadan and Jana Bright, 'The impact of migration in the Fenland area' (31 October 2019) [https://www.rosminicentrewisbech.org/uploads/1/3/4/8/13484456/final\\_report\\_on\\_31\\_oct\\_at\\_13.30.pdf](https://www.rosminicentrewisbech.org/uploads/1/3/4/8/13484456/final_report_on_31_oct_at_13.30.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> HM Government, 'The UK's points-based immigration system: policy statement' (February 2020) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uks-points-based-immigration-system-policy-statement/the-uks-points-based-immigration-system-policy-statement>.

<sup>3</sup> HM Government, 'Stay in the UK ('settled status'): step by step' <https://www.gov.uk/eusetledstatus>.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Thomas, 'Back to the Future: What history tells us about the challenges of post-Brexit UK immigration policy' (Social Market Foundation, 16 May 2019) <http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Back-to-the-future.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Maïke Bohn, 'The Brexodus is real, and it will hurt the UK' *The New Statesman*, 20 August 2018 <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/brexit/2018/08/brexodus-real-and-it-will-hurt-uk>.

<sup>6</sup> HM Government, 'The UK's future skills-based immigration system' (December 2018) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uks-future-skills-based-immigration-system>.

<sup>7</sup> HM Government, 'The UK's points-based immigration system: policy statement' (n 2).

<sup>8</sup> Association of Labour Providers, 'ALP Labour Provider Survey Results – October 2019' <https://labourproviders.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ALP-Labour-Provider-Survey-Results-October-2019.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Office for National Statistics, 'Migration Statistics Quarterly Report: August 2020' (27 August 2020) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/migrationstatisticsquarterlyreport/august2020>.

<sup>10</sup> SMF, 'Back to the Future' (n 4).

<sup>11</sup> ONS, 'Migration Statistics Quarterly Report: August 2020' (n 9).

<sup>12</sup> Michael O'Connor, 'Who's left (now)?' *Medium*, 8 November 2019 <https://medium.com/@StrongerInNos/whos-left-now-81587c24cd04>.

<sup>13</sup> SMF, 'Back to the Future' (n 4).

<sup>14</sup> Georgina Sturge and Oliver Hawkins, 'The progress of the EU Settlement Scheme so far' (House of Commons Library, 24 March 2020) <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/home-affairs/immigration/the-progress-of-the-eu-settlement-scheme-so-far/>.

Madeleine Sumption, 'Not Settled Yet? Understanding the EU Settlement Scheme using the Available Data' (The Migration Observatory, 16 April 2020) <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/reports/not-settled-yet-understanding-the-eu-settlement-scheme-using-the-available-data/>.

There are a number of possible explanations for this disparity, including the lack of accurate data as to how many EU citizens as a whole, or of individual nationalities, there are in the UK, particularly those that have arrived in greater numbers more recently, and also the potential of making multiple applications to the EU Settlement Scheme, for instance where only pre-settled status is initially granted. But even so the Bulgarian figure seems an impressive one.

<sup>15</sup> Caroline Nokes, Letter to the House of Commons, 'EU Settlement Scheme: update' (12 February 2019) [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/778890/EUSS\\_Letter.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/778890/EUSS_Letter.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Monique Hawkins, 'EU settlement scheme: are warnings of 'Windrush on steroids' overblown? (UK in a Changing Europe, 20 November 2019) <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/eu-settlement-scheme-are-warnings-of-windrush-on-steroids-overblown/>.

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- <sup>17</sup> Home Office, 'EU Settlement Scheme: Statement of Intent' (21 June 2018) [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/718237/EU\\_Settlement\\_Scheme\\_SOI\\_June\\_2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/718237/EU_Settlement_Scheme_SOI_June_2018.pdf).
- <sup>18</sup> The Migration Observatory, 'Not Settled Yet?' (n 14).
- <sup>19</sup> Greenfields et al, 'The impact of migration in the Fenland area' (n 1).
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu\\_referendum/results](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/eu_referendum/results).
- <sup>24</sup> Greenfields et al, 'The impact of migration in the Fenland area' (n 1).
- <sup>25</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> BBC, 'EU migration to UK 'underestimated' by ONS' (21 August 2019) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-49420730>.
- <sup>32</sup> Office for National Statistics, 'Population and migration statistics system transformation' (27 August 2020) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/transformationofthepopulationandmigrationstatisticssystemoverview/2019-06-21>.
- <sup>33</sup> *ibid.*
- Association of Labour Providers, 'ALP Labour Provider Survey Results – October 2019' (n 8).
- <sup>34</sup> Jonathan Thomas, 'Between a rock and a hard place, AVR 2.0: the case for rebooting Assisted Voluntary Return in the UK's immigration control regime' (Social Market Foundation, 2 December 2019) <http://www.smf.co.uk/publications/rock-hard-place/>.
- <sup>35</sup> Marina Fernandez-Reino, 'Migrants and discrimination in the UK' (The Migration Observatory, 20 January 2020) <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-and-discrimination-in-the-uk/>.
- <sup>36</sup> Greenfields et al, 'The impact of migration in the Fenland area' (n 1).
- <sup>37</sup> Priti Patel at Home Affairs Committee session on Home Office preparedness for Covid-19, 29 April 2020 <https://parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/7baf6cbe-6016-4c8e-bd79-f2919ad7d215>.
- <sup>38</sup> 'The Fiscal Contribution of EU Migrants: Update and Scenario Analysis for the Migration Advisory Committee (Oxford Economics, January 2020) [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/861246/Oxford\\_Economics\\_-\\_Fiscal\\_Contribution\\_of\\_EU\\_Migrants.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/861246/Oxford_Economics_-_Fiscal_Contribution_of_EU_Migrants.pdf).
- <sup>39</sup> 'Unlucky millennials', *The Economist* (18 April 2020) 26.