

Scotland's Strategic Migration Partnership

Meeting Summary: Preparing for a post-Brexit immigration system

Friday 22 March 2019, 9.30-12.00

COSLA, Verity House, 19 Haymarket Yards, Edinburgh, EH12 5BH

Scotland's Strategic Migration Partnership Board met with key stakeholders in March 2019 for a roundtable discussion on '**Preparing for a post-Brexit immigration system**'. Since the vote to leave the European Union in 2016 there has been concern amongst policy makers in Scotland about the impact of Brexit in terms of counteracting Scotland's demographic challenges and the impact on our workforce and local economies. This meeting explored the potential for flexibility within new legislation and policy proposals produced by Westminster and considered how Scottish stakeholders can prepare for the post-Brexit immigration system. The roundtable discussions were informed by inputs from Philippa Rouse of the Home Office, Rachel Sunderland of Scottish Government, Christina Boswell of Edinburgh University, Isabel Bremner of Argyll and Bute Council and Jill Rutter of British Futures.

The Home Office highlighted that their objectives for a post-Brexit immigration system are to ensure that the immigration system meets needs of the economy, allows the brightest and best to work in the UK, supports a diverse society, and addresses people's concerns by reducing net immigration. They introduced the UK Government's White Paper on **The UK's future skills-based immigration system** which sets out a proposed framework for immigration once Freedom of Movement ends. They were clear that they wanted input from Scottish stakeholders on the new system, and saw the Board meeting as the beginning of a conversation.

Scottish Government explained that there was a long-established differential approach to migration in Scotland compared to the rest of the UK, and that this has cross party support. The new proposals from the Home Office bring Scotland's challenges into sharp focus. The key thing that has changed Scotland's population story in the last twenty years is free movement and switching that off creates a critical challenge for Scotland. They welcomed the opportunity presented by the White Paper consultation, to begin a dialogue with the Home Office.

There were also presentations from Christina Boswell of University of Edinburgh on the work of the Scottish Government's Expert Advisory Group on Migration; Jill Rutter of British Future on research they had carried out on public attitudes to migration; and Isabel Bremner of Argyll and Bute Council on the work of west coast councils to tackle their significant demographic challenges.

What are the implications of The UK's future skills-based immigration system White Paper and the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill on future immigration system in Scotland?

- Like other parts of the UK, Scotland faces the demographic challenge of an ageing and declining population but the issues are more acute here and we also face distinct issues

related to rurality and the fact that migration is Scotland's only population driver (the birth rate is negative in Scotland unlike elsewhere in the UK).

- It was felt by many present that there is a distinct and specific challenge for Scotland which needs a particular response in terms of immigration policy.
- The proposed Shortage Occupation Lists are a welcome acknowledgement of regional variation, but there is more scope for flexibility. For example, Scottish Government has proposed a Scottish Visa.
- Positively influencing birth rates was discussed but discounted as a potential alternative way of influencing positive change. Despite Scottish Government initiatives to support children and families, there are still significant structural and cultural barriers to achieving a higher birth rate.
- The misconception that EU migrants mainly do unskilled work was challenged. Flexibility in free movement will close down routes for people to come to the UK as unskilled workers and move into more skilled work. The 12-month visa system that is currently proposed is unlikely to address this.
- Short term migration that will be supported by the 12-month visa will create a throughput of people, challenges in supporting integration and greater pressure on public services.
- Everyone welcomed the opportunities to have a discussion of these issues with the Home Office present. They hoped that this would be the start of the conversation.

How can we attract in-migration to Scotland if there is an increasingly restrictive immigration system?

- It was agreed that there is a need for a conversation on how we support the evolution of public opinion around migration in Scotland. There is a challenge in developing evidence based policy which also has the support of the public. In order to build public support, you need to have a public conversation.
- The role of Parliament in developing a more transparent, open and democratically accountable system is also important, rather than using immigration rules to quietly reshape the system.
- There is a need for a more evidence based approach, and that raises questions about the role of the Migration Advisory Committee and the shortcomings of that structure in terms of representing Scottish interests.
- The role of employers in improving pay and working conditions to attract people to areas suffering depopulation was discussed. However, geographical challenges also need to be taken into account as well as national pay deals which preclude (for example) teachers being paid more in rural areas.
- There was discussion about whether Scotland needs an integration strategy. It was agreed that there needs to be a more holistic approach to integration, which focuses on communities rather than setting migrants apart. There was an acknowledgement that the experiences of migrants in deprived areas are very similar to other people in the same areas.

Summing up and next steps?

- The Home Office will visit Scotland again soon to discuss the White Paper with business leaders.
- The Home Office will continue the conversation with COSLA, councils and Scottish Government.
- COSLA will invite the Home Office to Scotland to meet with Councils and hear their feedback on the White Paper.