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European Union Migrants in Social Housing in England

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Abstract

In May 2007, writing in *The Observer*, the cabinet minister Margaret Hodge stirred up political debate and prompted a flurry of media coverage with her claims that migrant workers from the new European Union accession states were gaining access to the scarce resource that is social housing at the expense of British citizens. Conspicuous by its absence from Hodge's comments or the heated debate that followed was reference to any evidence to substantiate these alleged injustices. This paper fills this void in understanding through the analysis of CORE data. The CORE database details the lettings of 600 housing associations and more than 80 per cent of all local authorities in England - 191,000 lettings in 2006/07. CORE data is collected through the completion of a CORE log as part of the new tenant sign-up procedure. This log includes a nationality question, allowing the number and profile of new lettings to migrant workers from the EU accession states to be analysed. The findings to emerge from this analysis are presented and contrasted against stories of unfairness and injustice in the allocation of social housing. What is revealed is a yawning gap between perception and reality.

Key words: migrant workers; A8; social housing; Margaret Hodge; CORE.

Introduction

In May 2004, 10 new countries joined the European Union (EU) - Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Malta and (Greek) Cyprus. In January 2007, a further two countries - Romania and Bulgaria - became full members of the EU. Nationals from these countries are free to live and, under certain conditions, work in the UK. The numbers of people from the 12 Accession States taking advantage of this opportunity and coming to the UK to work is difficult to estimate. There is little doubting, however, that relatively large numbers of nationals from the EU Accession States have arrived into the UK and are living and working in cities, towns, and rural locations across the country.

Until recently, discussion and debate regarding the impacts of this new immigration stream into the UK had tended to focus on labour market consequences and the costs and benefits to the UK economy. As the scale of new immigration from the EU

Accession States has become more fully apparent, however, concerns have been increasingly voiced about the social consequences, including the impact on public spending and service provision, as well as social harmony and cohesion. Housing - and the question of who gets what where - has emerged as a central issue within this intensifying debate, promoted, in no small part, by the intervention of government minister Margaret Hodge. Writing in *The Observer* in May 2007, Hodge questioned why the needs of immigrant households were being prioritised over the rights and requirements of long-standing residents and went on to query why migrant workers should presume the right to social housing. As Trevor Phillips, the chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, has observed, there is no reliable evidence to substantiate such claims. This has not stopped the perception that migrants are unfairly advantaged in the allocation of social housing emerging as one of the most frequently alleged injustices of new immigration (Phillips, 2007). There does exist, however, a rich, and as yet untapped, source of information that allows the validity of such claims to be tested. CORE (COntinuous REcording) is a national database that records information on the characteristics, including nationality, of both housing association and local authority new social housing tenants in England and the homes they rent and buy. This paper draws on the CORE data to put Hodge's assertions to the test by generating a profile of the lettings made by social landlords in England to migrants from EU accession states in 2006/07.

Discussion begins with a short overview of the scale of new immigration from the EU Accession States, before going on to chart emerging concerns about the social consequences of EU migration, encapsulated in the comments of Margaret Hodge, that served to place housing at the centre of this debate. Discussion then moves on to consider the CORE data and test the allegation of unfairness in the allocation of social housing through analysis of the numbers and profile of EU Accession State migrants allocated social housing.

The Scale of EU Accession State Immigration to the UK - An Overview

It is difficult to be sure how many people from the 12 Accession States (A12) have arrived into and settled in the UK in recent years. It is possible, however, to gain some insight into the scale of migration from National Insurance number (NINo) data. The National Insurance Recording system records all overseas nationals allocated a NINo, a requirement in order to work in the formal labour market in the UK and to receive benefits and tax credits. The NINo data point to a dramatic increase in new immigration from the A12 states in the period immediately following the first phase of EU enlargement in 2004 (Table 1). Between 2003/04 and 2004/05 there was a 90,500 (315 per cent) increase in registrations from the A12. Another large increase - 157,500 (132 per cent) - was recorded in 2005/06. The impact of the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU appears to have, so far, been less dramatic, probably reflecting the tighter restrictions placed on nationals from these states working in the UK and the fact that accession only occurred part way through the recorded year. There was still, however, a 44,500 increase in registrations from A12 states (16 per cent) between 2005/06 and 2006/07.

The result of these dramatic increases is that a total of 717,100 new NINo registrations involving A12 nationals were recorded between 2004/05 and 2006/07. The vast majority of these registrations involved nationals from just three A12 states; almost two-thirds (64

per cent) were from Poland, 10 per cent were from Lithuanian and nine per cent were from Slovakia.

Table 1 A12 nationals entering the UK and allocated a NINo, by year of registration

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
EU Accession Countries	17,900	28,700	119,200	276,700	321,200
All Countries (Total)	349,200	370,700	439,700	662,400	713,500

Source: DWP (2006)

There are some obvious weaknesses with the use of NINo data as a measure of new immigration. Many new migrant workers do not apply for a NINo, some working in the informal economy and others being self-employed and not required to register. In addition, many people who do apply for a NINo subsequently leave the UK. There is no disputing the general picture painted by the data, however, that substantial numbers of new immigrants from the A12 states have come to live and work in the UK in recent years. Analysis of the domicile address of NINo applicants has also revealed that few places in the UK have been left unaffected by this new wave of immigration (Audit Commission, 2007).

The Consequences of EU Migration - Emerging Issues and Rising Concerns

One of the distinctive features of the early years of large scale migration into the UK from the EU Accession States was the relatively positive reception that greeted new immigrants. This is not to suggest that the experiences of A12 migrants were problem free (see for example, Markova and Black, 2007 and Spencer et al., 2007). There is no doubting, however, that a sharp contrast existed between the relatively positive portrayal of new immigrants from the EU accession states in political and media discourses and the, often hostile, reception that was greeting other immigration streams into the UK, in particular asylum seekers and refugees (Robinson and Reeve, 2005). Migrant workers from the EU accession states were regularly portrayed within the media as hard working and willing to put in long hours for relatively low wages¹. They were also championed by employers' leaders and the government as making a substantial contribution to the national economy². Reflecting specifically on the experiences of Polish new immigrants, Kohn (2007) has suggested that this positive reception might reflect the fact that, in contrast to many previous immigration streams, Polish migrant workers were perceived as correcting problems, rather than creating them, and as embodying the values and attitudes of a nostalgic bygone era: they are *'keen, young, white people, taking whatever work is on offer and going to church every Sunday'* (2007, p9). This is not to suggest, however, that concerns were not voiced about the consequences of A12 migration.

¹ See for example: The Observer, 27 August 2006, (guardian.co.uk/immigration/story/0,,1859186,00.html); The Daily Mail, 23 July 2006, (dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=396825&in_page_id=1770)

² See, for example: Gardiner, B. (2006) Speech to the National Migrant Worker conference, London, 9 May 2006 (defra.gov.uk/corporate/ministers/speeches/barry-gardiner/bg060509.htm); Stewart, H. (2006) So far, migrant workers have been just the job, The Observer, 27 August.

In June 2007 the government launched the Migration Impacts Forum (MIF), a panel of "experts" from across the public services, charged with helping collect evidence on how migration affects issues, including housing, employment, education, health and social care and community cohesion. Evident within terms of reference of the MIF is the emergence of increasing differentiation between, on the one hand, the economic gains that A12 migration is perceived to bring and, on the other, the localised challenges that can arise. These challenges have been recognised as taking two forms.

First, concerns have been voiced about the challenges for local service providers raised by the arrival into their area of large numbers of EU migrants. While it has been acknowledged that migrant workers tend to be young and arrive into the UK without families, therefore making few demands on health, education and social services, localised pressures have been recognised (Audit Commission, 2007). These pressures are reported to be raising challenges for agencies resourcing and delivering key services. In May 2007, for example, four local authorities - Westminster, Slough, Hammersmith & Fulham and Kensington & Chelsea - lobbied the Treasury in protest at the difficulties they claimed to be facing maintaining current levels of service provision and meeting local needs in the context of large scale population increases driven by new immigration (see for example, Councils lobby treasury over immigration statistics, *The Guardian*, May 14 2007). A similar appeal was issued by Cambridgeshire Police (Cambridge Police Authority, 2007) who argued that population change, driven primarily by new immigration, was leaving the county short-changed because of the inflexible and unresponsive funding formula that failed to acknowledge the rate of population growth.

Specific challenges have also been reported in delivering frontline services - such as policing and education - in the context of rapid population change and increasing diversity, driven by new immigration. The Cambridgeshire Police Authority (2007) has pointed to the *"multiplicity of languages and cultures to which the police are exposed during the course of their duties poses an additional enormous logistical and communication challenge"* (p.22). Education is another service area where challenges have been identified, the Audit Commission (2007) pointing to the emergence of new pressures, such as the need to teach English as an additional language (EAL), and questioned whether teachers, schools and Local Education Authorities in areas effected possess the necessary experience, expertise and capacity to effectively manage the challenges raised by the shifting profile and numbers of pupils.

The second perceived challenge raised by migration from the accession states relates to the potential consequences for community cohesion. Migrant workers from the EU are moving beyond the major towns and cities that have been the traditional destination for new immigrants into the UK. This has raised concerns about the challenges associated with the arrival of new immigrants into locations with little or no recent history of accommodating diversity and difference. The government sponsored Commission for Integration and Cohesion (2007), for example, has suggested that some of the most significant cohesion challenges in the future are likely to emerge in the small town and rural areas that many migrant workers have been drawn to by opportunities in the agriculture and food processing industries.

These two themes - the consequences of new immigration for service provision and the implications for community cohesion - have increasingly being drawn on by government to explain its retreat from a position of unbridled support for EU migration, that was rooted in assumptions regarding the economic benefits of new immigration, toward a

more sceptical position. This retreat had already been signalled by the decision in 2006 to place more stringent restrictions on the right of Romanian and Bulgarian nationals to work in the UK, as part of the transitional arrangements put in place at the time of their accession to the EU in 2007. However, explaining the introduction of these transitional arrangements the then Home Secretary had merely observed, rather obtusely, that "*the overall impact of immigration from Eastern Europe has had positive effects on the UK economy*", but that "*now is not really the time for another large wave of migrant workers*" (quoted in King, 2006). By June 2007, the government had firmed up its rationale for adopting a more sceptical position toward A12 migration, pointing to the need for economic gains to be weighed against the social consequences:

I believe there are choices to be made, and we need to make the choices that are right for our country.....We have to take into account the impacts in our communities here in this country which have to be weighed in the balance against the opportunities and the benefits. John Reid, Home Secretary, 21 June 2007.

A clear motivation for the articulation of this more sceptical position was the need to be seen to be recognising and responding to people's concerns about the changes being wrought by A12 migration. This fact was explicitly acknowledged by the Home Secretary, speaking at the launch of the MIF in June 2007, who pointed to the need for government to "*demonstrate that we are listening to people's concerns about immigration*" (Home Office, 2007). The 'concerns' referred to by the Home Secretary had previously occupied the outer fringes of political debate on A12 migration and had only appeared intermittently in media coverage of the issue (see Lies, damned lies and immigration, The Independent, 22 August 2006 for examples). However, in an intriguing political coincidence, these 'concerns' had been pushed up the political agenda, with incendiary effect, just weeks before the launch of the MIF by the high profile comments of the Home Secretary's cabinet colleague Margaret Hodge.

Stories of Injustice in the Allocation of Social Housing

Writing in The Observer in May 2007, Margaret Hodge pointed to the rapid changes taking place in her constituency of Barking in east London, driven by ongoing immigration. She then went on to observe that this process of transition can prove "*disturbing and painful*" for "*settled communities*" and can arouse "*resentments and fears*" that must be heeded. Only by acknowledging these concerns, she argued, can we "*move beyond the fears to secure tolerance and harmony*". Hodge then went on to focus explicitly on migrant workers and the issue that has become totemic within discussion of the social consequences of immigration; access to the scarce resource that is social housing.

Justifying her incursion into the thorny issue of what new immigrants get and why, Hodge argued for the need to "*question and debate whether our rules for deciding who can access social housing are fair and promote tolerance rather than inviting division*". She then went on to answer her own question, arguing that:

We prioritise the needs of an individual migrant family over the entitlement others feel they have. So a recently arrived family with four or five children living in a damp and overcrowded, privately rented flat with the children

suffering from asthma will usually get priority over a family with less housing need who have lived in the area for three generations and are stuck at home with the grandparents.

She then distinguished between the needs of refugees and the expectations of economic migrants:

There are a small number of confirmed refugees who, of course, would receive the same entitlements as British citizens. However, most new migrant families are economic migrants who choose to come to live and work here. If you choose to come to Britain, should you presume the right to access social housing?

Evident within Hodge's line of questioning are a number of popular themes that have commonly been thrown into the mix whenever immigration has been discussed over the last 50 years. Immigrants - in this case migrant workers with a legal right to live and work in the UK - are portrayed as expecting and gaining access to the benefits of citizenship at the expense of British citizens. The 'system' - in this case, the allocation process governing access to social housing - is portrayed as systematically discriminating against 'indigenous' families. The rationales of public policy - in this case the prioritising of need above rights - are portrayed as rewarding migrant families at the expense of local people.

Clearly, Hodge is venturing into highly sensitive territory, the occupation of which can prove hugely contentious, a fact illustrated by the political and media storm that followed her comments. It is therefore vital that such observations and assertions pay due care and attention to the realities of the situation, rather than relying on perception, presumption, hearsay and rumours. For Hodge's comments to pass this 'reality test', there would appear to be two critical questions that need answering.

The first question concerns the rights of migrant workers to access social housing. Under the European Union (Accession) Act 2003, the UK government has been allowed to impose restrictions on the rights of EU nationals from Accession States to work in the UK for up to seven years. These restrictions, in turn, impact on the rights of these EU nationals to access social housing, as well as other social security benefits. Accession State nationals, with some specific exceptions (people working in the UK prior to accession, people with dual nationality and the self employed), are required to register with the Home Office under the Worker Registration Scheme within one month of starting work in order to be working legally in the UK. After 12 months of continuous employment with the same employer an Accession State worker will be entitled to the same rights as other EU workers. Only at this point do Accession State nationals gain the right to access social housing. Accession State nationals who do not register with the Home Office - which many fail to do (Anderson et al., 2006) - are therefore ineligible for social housing, as are Accession State Nationals who enter the UK looking for work and Accession State Nationals who are registered and working but are made unemployed before having worked continuously for 12 months. Contrary to popular perception, therefore, migrant workers from EU Accession States have only a restricted right to social housing.

The second critical question raised by Hodges' allegations is just who is gaining access to social housing and are economic migrants entering the sector in numbers likely to

impact on the opportunities available to longer standing residents? The remainder of this paper draws on CORE data to explore this key question.

The CORE Data

CORE details the general and supported housing lettings of 600 housing associations (all associations with more than 250 properties are required to submit details of lettings) and more than 80 per cent of all local authorities in England (all stock owning authorities will soon be required to complete a CORE log). Completion of the CORE log is part of the new tenant sign-up procedure, resulting in the collection of information about the household and the property every time a letting is made. Social landlords submit these details to the CORE system on a monthly basis.

Standard forms are used for recording tenant, household and property information, with questions primarily relating to the named tenant (person 1). Variables relating to the tenant and household include age and gender, relationships within the household, economic status, income, benefit entitlements (including Housing Benefit), disability, ethnicity and, critical for our interests, nationality. The nationality question is a closed box question, that allows applicants to define the nationality of 'Person 1' as one of the following:

- UK national resident in the UK
- UK national returning to the UK
- Czech Republic
- Estonia
- Hungary
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Poland
- Slovakia
- Slovenia
- Other European Economic Area (EEA) country - current members of the EEA are three of the four EFTA states - Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway - and the 27 EU Member States
- Any other country
- Refused

This question allows analysis of the lettings made to nationals of, what are commonly referred to as, the A8 states - the Eastern European accession states that joined the EU in 2004 (Cyprus and Malta became full members of the Free Movement of workers agreement immediately upon entering the EU) and from where the vast majority (more than 80 per cent according to NINo data) of EU migrants have arrived into the UK. As well as allowing a profile of A8 tenants to be generated, additional questions support analysis of the type of property allocated and the location of new lettings. The remainder of this paper draws on this rich data source to explore the profile of lettings made to A8 migrants in 2006/07.

A8 migrants in Social Housing

In 2006/07, CORE recorded 191,185 general needs social rented lettings across England. Analysis reveals that less than five per cent (4.54 per cent) of these lettings were to foreign nationals and less than one per cent (0.9 per cent or 1,544 lettings) were to A8 nationals (Table 2).

Table 2 Nationality of New Social Renting Tenants (2006/07)³

Nationality	Frequency	Percentage
UK Nationals	162,635	95.46
Czech Republic	262	0.15
Estonia	94	0.05
Hungary	134	0.08
Latvia	116	0.07
Lithuania	177	0.1
Poland	674	0.4
Slovakia	59	0.03
Slovenia	28	0.02
Other European Economic Area Country	1,552	0.91
Any Other Country	4,631	2.73
Total	170,363	100

Clearly, this finding does not square with the perception, propagated by Margaret Hodge, of large numbers of migrant workers gaining access to the benefits of social housing at the expense of long-standing residents. Seeking to explain away this anomaly one might point to the concentration of migrant workers in London and suggest that the national picture masks a very different situation in the capital, from where Hodge was writing. This explanation is not supported by the evidence, however. As Table 3 reveals, the number of new lettings to A8 nationals as a proportion of the total number of lettings by social landlords varied little across the regions. In fact, the largest numbers of lettings to A8 nationals were actually recorded outside London, in the North West, East of England and Yorkshire and the Humber (Table 4).

Table 3 A8 New tenants as a proportion of all new tenants (by region)

Government Office Region	A8 Tenants	% of All New Tenancies	All New Tenants
North East	35	0.2	17,093
Yorkshire and the Humber	185	1.0	18,129
East Midlands	143	0.9	15,358
East of England	243	1.2	20,539
London	168	0.9	17,723
South East	92	0.4	22,743
South West	55	0.3	16,782
West Midlands	168	0.6	27,122
North West	455	1.3	35,676
England	1,544	0.8	191,165

³ Source: All tables are derived from analysis of CORE data (Copyright CORE, Housing Corporation).

Table 4 Distribution of new letting to A8 nationals across the English regions

Government Office Region	A8 Tenants	All New Tenants
North East	2.3	8.9
Yorkshire and the Humber	12.0	9.5
East Midlands	9.3	8.0
East of England	15.7	10.7
London	10.9	9.3
South East	5.9	11.9
South West	3.6	8.8
West Midlands	10.9	14.2
North West	29.5	18.7
Total	100	100
Total	1,544	191,165

The geography of these new lettings to A8 migrants reflects the distinctive settlement pattern associated with recent EU migration, with large numbers of new immigrants venturing beyond London and the metropolitan centres that have traditionally served as the destination for new immigrants in England (Audit Commission, 2007). This fact is reinforced by the data presented in Table 5, which reveals that many of the lettings have to A8 nationals were in smaller towns and rural areas.

Table 5 Distribution of new lettings to A8 nationals by location type

Location Type*	A8 Tenants	All New Tenants
Major Urban	45.3	36.5
Large Urban	11.9	16.7
Other Urban	20.0	16.2
Significant Rural	10.4	10.9
Rural-50	7.0	9.4
Rural-80	5.4	10.3
Total	1,544	191,185

*Note: The DEFRA classification of the rurality of local authority districts in England defines six categories:

- Major Urban: districts with either 100,000 people or 50 percent of their population in urban areas with a population of more than 750,000.
- Large Urban: districts with either 50,000 people or 50 percent of their population in one of 17 urban areas with a population between 250,000 and 750,000.
- Other Urban: districts with fewer than 37,000 people or less than 26 percent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns.
- Significant Rural: districts with more than 37,000 people or more than 26 percent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns.
- Rural-50: districts with at least 50 percent but less than 80 percent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns.
- Rural-80: districts with at least 80 percent of their population in rural settlements and larger market towns.

Clearly, allegations that migrant workers are stealing a march on British citizens and gaining access to the scarce resource that is social housing do not stand up to rigorous analysis. The CORE data also serves to challenge a number of other allegations commonly levelled against new immigrants. A finding of particular note, given familiar portrayals of migrants exploiting the generosity of the British welfare state, is the fact that A8 households moving into a new social rented tenancy are far more likely than the wider population of new tenants to have at least one member in employment. As Table 6 reveals, almost three-quarters of A8 households have at least one member in paid

employment, compared to just one-third of all households moving into a new social rented tenancy. Named tenants in A8 households are also far more likely to be in work (Table 7). This finding likely reflects the fact that A8 nationals have come to the UK to work and are only able to secure the right of access to social housing if they have a record of consistent employment.

Table 6 Households containing at least one member in work.

Household Member in Work?	A8 Tenants	All New Tenants
Yes	71.2	35.7
No	28.8	64.3
Total	1,535	176,477

Table 7 Economic status of named tenant

Economic Status	A8 Tenants	All New Tenants
Working full-time	58.6	24.3
Working part-time	9.4	8.4
Govnt training/ New Deal	0.2	0.3
Unemployed	8.2	15.9
Retired	4.7	11.0
Home / not seeking work	11.9	24.9
Student	1.1	1.4
Sick or disabled	3.8	12.3
Other	1.9	1.5
Total	1,506	171,701

Reflecting the relatively high levels of employment within A8 households moving into the social rented sector, only a relatively small proportion of tenants or their partners were recorded as qualifying for or being in receipt of state benefits. Almost half of all A8 new tenants reported that they do not qualify for Housing Benefit, compared to less than one-quarter of all new tenants (Table 8), and only 37 per cent of A8 tenants and their partners reported deriving income from benefits of any kind, compared to two-thirds of all new tenants and their partners (Table 9).

Table 8 Qualification for housing benefit

In Receipt of Housing benefit	A8 Tenants	All New Tenants
Yes	27.8	57.1
No	47.3	22.1
Don't know	24.9	20.8
Total	1,521	173,993

Table 9 Source of income for tenant or tenant and partner

Source of Income	A8 Tenants	All New Tenants
Wholly derived from benefits	18.6	50.8
Partly derived from benefits	18.4	15.5
Not receiving benefits	49.1	21.4
Don't know	13.8	12.3
Total	1,517	172,882

Another finding of note is that the fact that, despite allegations of preferential treatment in the allocation process, A8 nationals are moving into less popular property types. Only one-third (35.5 per cent) of A8 nationals moved into a house or bungalow, while 60 per cent moved into a flat or maisonette (Table 10).

Table 10 Property type of new letting

Type of Unit	A8 Tenants	All New Tenants
Flat/maisonette	61.9	53.0
Bedsit	2.1	2.5
House/bungalow	35.5	44.0
Shared house/bungalow	0.4	0.3
Other	0.0	0.05
Total	1,544	191,185

A8 nationals were more likely to move into a property with two or more bedrooms (Table 11), but this fact appears to reflect the relatively large household size and high proportion of A8 households with dependent children. Less than one-third of A8 nationals were living in a single person household, compared to almost half of all new tenants in 2006/7 and half of all A8 households moving into a new social tenancy contained at least one dependent child, compared to only 40 per cent of the wider population of new tenants (Tables 12 and 13). This finding is consistent with evidence suggesting that migrant workers, who typically arrive into the UK on their own or with friends, are often subsequently joined by other family members (Robinson et al., 2007).

Table 11 Number of bedrooms in new letting

Number of Bedrooms	A8 Tenants	All New Tenants
1	31.5	37.9
2	43.5	38.8
3	23.4	21.3
4+	1.2	2.0
Total	1,544	191,185

Table 12 Household size

Number of Household Members	A8 Tenants	All New Tenants
1	32.1	47.2
2	26.2	27.6
3	23.7	16.1
4	12.4	8.7
5	3.9	3.9
6	1.3	1.4
7	0.3	0.5
8	0.3	0.3
Total	1,544	171,605

Table 13 Number of dependent children

Number of Dependent Children	A8 Tenants	All New Tenants
None	50.0	60.3
1	29.0	21.1
2	15.5	11.4
3	3.6	4.9
4+	1.9	2.3
Total	1,544	191,185

Closing Discussion

There is no doubting that the level of new immigration from the EU accession states witnessed in recent years is driving change in many neighbourhoods. The specifics of this process of change and the consequences for both new immigrants and long-standing residents will vary from place to place. While in some locations the arrival of new immigrants might serve as an engine for regeneration of an unpopular neighbourhood, in others their arrival might exacerbate existing problems with the supply of essential resources and services, such as housing or education (Robinson and Reeve, 2006). Margaret Hodge was right to point out that such challenges can arise and that for existing residents this process of change can prove unsettling and disturbing. She was also right to acknowledge that these concerns can feed resentments and fears that need to be recognised and addressed. Her mistake was to elevate the rumour and hearsay on which these fears are often founded to the status of fact.

A recent review of the evidence base revealed there to be little hard evidence regarding the neighbourhood consequences of new immigration (Robinson and Reeve, 2006). This gap in understanding is currently being filled by word of mouth stories, unconfirmed reports and simplistic assumptions about new immigrants - who they are, their circumstances and motivations, the services they use, the resources they rely upon and the challenges their presence raises. It is important to listen to and understand these local narratives of new immigration, for it is in such assumptions that the suspicion and hostility that often greets new immigrants is rooted. It is also important, however, to test the validity of such narratives against available evidence and advertise the findings. In the case of Margaret Hodge's comments regarding migrant workers in social housing, the conclusion to be drawn from the analysis outlined above is unequivocal; there is no factual basis to the concerns that she raises. This point is starkly illustrated by the fact that only 1 out of 185 new housing association lettings in 2006/07 in Barking and Dagenham, the area that Hodge represents and to which she refers in her Observer piece, was to an A8 national (the local authority did not participate in CORE during 2006/07). This is not to suggest that her constituency is not experiencing rapid change or that the population profile of particular streets and neighbourhoods is not being transformed by the arrival of new immigrants, presumably moving into private rented accommodation. The point is that the divisive assertion that migrant workers are somehow stealing a march on long-standing residents and gaining access to the scarce resource that is social housing is not supported by available evidence and is not part of the change currently being wrought by migration from the EU accession states.

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