

East Europeans in London

**A Peer Led Study of the Issues Faced by East Europeans in London
Relating Housing, Employment, Household Income and Support Needs**

December 2013

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In 2004 eight Central and Eastern European countries joined the European Union: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia (jointly known as 'A8 countries'), followed in 2007 by Bulgaria and Romania ('A2 countries'). Nearly 10 years passed and East European Advice Centre set out to check where East European Londoners live and work, how they stand financially and what they do when they need advice and support.

Overall, 512 East European migrants took part in the project: 455 responded to the survey conducted by peer researchers in randomly selected locations and 57 took part in focus groups and individual consultations. The research took place between May and October 2013.

Key messages from the study:

Housing

- Housing and income issues are of great concern for EE migrants, young and old.
- Renting is the most common form of tenure, at 83% of respondents (comparing with 49% London average). Only 11% own or part-own home (comparing with 39% London average).
- Of those renting, disproportionate 86% of respondents rent from private landlords. Less than 14% rents from a council or a housing association (comparing with London average split of 50% to 50% renting from private and social landlords).
- Nearly 70% of those who rent privately expressed concerns about poor quality housing, repairs, overcrowding, and non-return of a deposit. The common response to housing problems is moving house. Only 7% sought professional advice.

Employment

- 80% of respondents are in employment (full, part-time or self-employment) comparing with 62% London average. Unemployment affects 7.5% of respondents and very few are retired.
- Subsections of the EE community, specifically those aged 50 – 64 and those who do not speak English well, are most disadvantaged in the employment market.
- A lack of English language skills presents the biggest barrier to finding employment, followed by job searching skills (e.g. writing CV, interviewing skills) and lack of UK-based work experience. Other barriers include a lack of knowledge of the UK (culture, social and economic systems, etc.), and non-transferable qualifications.
- Nearly 1/3 of respondents feel that they are overqualified for their jobs and 43% feel their skills match their job level. English language skills and low confidence present an impediment to gaining skill-appropriate employment - 20% of respondents feel not confident to seek appropriate employment.
- Over 64% sought help with obtaining employment. Of those, 86% asked friends or family and 35% sought help from mainstream agencies (e.g. A4E, Connexions, Groundwork London). Overall, 76% of those seeking any support very dissatisfied with help.
- 40% of respondents faced serious work-related issues: exploitation (21%), withholding of wages (11%), abuse in the workplace (7%), unfair dismissal (5%). Nearly half of respondents reported other issues that don't qualify as neither of those.
- 30% of respondents 'put up with' work issues and 27% felt unable to take any action other than leaving

their jobs. Some take their problems to management, but it is uncommon to seek professional advice. Most respondents are dissatisfied with how their employment related problems are dealt with.

Household income

- Income is almost exclusively from employment and, to a far lesser extent, state benefits or income support. Very few East Europeans have savings or investment income.
- Over 20% of respondents are 'struggling', or 'really struggling' on their current income.
- Over 30% have faced a financial crisis since they have been in the UK (understood as lack of money for food, medicines, bills and other essentials).
- Most common form of dealing with financial crisis is to borrow from friends. Very few seek advice or check their entitlement to benefits. Only 17% ever checked their welfare entitlements, only 8% had access to a bank loan. 22% 'went without'.

Seeking advice and support

- Word of mouth is the dominant way of gaining knowledge and getting advice. When in need, East Europeans tend to turn to peers: colleagues at work, acquaintances, family members, friends. Many seek help through social outlets, such as churches and shops, and through social networks, East European websites and the community press.
- Help and advice is mostly sought at crisis point, usually after exhausting all other ways.
- Just under 17% sought help from mainstream advice agencies (voluntary and statutory), but were not satisfied.
- Main barriers to access mainstream advice and support are: 1) English language skills, 2) poor attitude towards support agencies (genuine lack of awareness, no experiences in homeland, very low confidence), 3) apprehension about statutory agencies (believing that the agencies are hostile and omnipotent, and one intervention will lead to another, e.g. accessing mental health services will result in children being taken to care), 4) transplanting norms of behaviour from homeland (over-reliance on word of mouth and 'connections', mistrust to agencies). Focus groups indicated also the onset of 'ghettoisation' understood as reliance on the community communication channels alone and limited interactions with the host society, particularly among those with low level of English and in unqualified jobs.
- Overall, East Europeans report confusion in the face of perceived complexity of the British systems: legal, employment, housing, education, and the feeling of being alone with problems. Some respondents reported that 'nobody will help you out there', 'I'd rather stand on my own feet' or 'better keep to your own'.

Recommendations

The most successful strategies to work with and support East European migrants should contain:

- information and advice – it is necessary to raise awareness of differences in systems between the UK and Central and Eastern Europe
- emphasis on peer solutions - to break language and cultural barriers, and to build more equal relationship based on trust and not on 'institutionalism' of support
- emergence of opinion leaders – these migrants well-connected to their local communities, often settled for a number of years, can be an important source of support as can be easily accessible for fellow expatriots
- outreach is most likely to implement these peer solutions, particularly outreach targeting 'hard to reach' East European migrants, mainly those with poor English, working anti-social hours, not able to travel due to cost or circumstances, and facing other barriers to information and support

Note about respondents

All respondents taking part in this study are the first generation immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe. The study focuses on A8 nationals as at the time of carrying out research A2 migrants (Bulgarians and Romanians) faced restrictions to the UK's labour market and services. 90% of respondents are in age 18 – 49 years old, 8% 50 – 64 years old and 2% over 64. 60% are female. Half of respondents have been to UK less than 5.5 years (of whom half have been shorter than 2 years). 27% are married or in civil partnership (comparing to 39% London average) and 32% have one or more children. 10% have limiting health problem or disability (comparing to 15% London average). Overall, the 'average East European migrant' tends to be younger, unmarried, without limiting illness or disability, and female (which is almost certainly due to the sample bias as male respondents are more difficult to engage in the social research).

Note about the project

The study was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, the EEAC commissioned a charity LIFT to carry out a peer-led survey: 18 East European migrants were trained in social research and questioning skills, and then supported to survey randomly selected East European Londoners. In May 2013 455 questionnaires were collected from people met in consulate waiting rooms, churches, cafes, 'deli' shops, Saturday schools, GP surgeries and hospitals and other similar venues. A number of mainstream charities were also asked for their views on needs and problems faced by East Europeans. Responses were then analysed and findings used as the basis of the second stage: focus groups and individual consultations that took place between September and October. The results of both stages are presented in this paper. All information presented is drawn from the primary sources.

The project team

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The project is funded by the Big Lottery Fund.

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