

Social Impact of Population Change in Boston Task and Finish Group
Notes of Evidence-Gathering Meeting of 8th June 2012 (3.30 pm)

Present: Councillors Paul Kenny (Chairman), Paul Gleeson (Vice-Chairman), Richard Austin, Elliott Fountain, Mike Gilbert, Paul Mould, Dr Samra and Judith Skinner [*Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Richard Leggott*]

In attendance: Councillor Peter Bedford

Officers: Phil Drury and Janette Collier

Witness giving evidence: Mark Simmonds, MP for Boston and Skegness

Questions from Councillors:

You have been our MP since 2001 and must have seen many changes in Boston in that time. What have changed for the better? What has changed for the worse?

The most noticeable is the significant increase in economic migrants to this part of Lincolnshire. But this has not just been since 2004; immigration was a significant part of the election in 2001, though it has come up the political agenda. The local population has become more used and accepting of the situation, which is positive.

My greatest disappointment is that Boston has not made significant diversification from agriculture since 2001. This is partly due to the recession. It is also because of the role of the Environment Agency in economic development in the last 5-6 years; it has not allowed development or business expansion, which would create more jobs. Through the hard work of Boston Borough Council and Lincolnshire County Council the Environment Agency now has much more of a partnership role and this will help with inward investment.

When you hold your constituency surgeries, what percentage of different nationalities come to see you? What kinds of issues are brought to you? Do you get many concerns regarding immigration issues?

Surgeries are not the only form of interaction I have with people; the bulk of it is through e-mail and letters. I receive 350 e-mails and 150 letters per day, mostly from my constituency, and they're mostly to do with the individual challenges people face in their own lives. The bulk of them come from UK citizens; a handful of foreign nationals come to see me, but their first port of call is the council or the Citizens' Advice Bureau who can pass on matters to me.

50% of enquiries are to do with benefits; access to benefits, loss of benefits or the proposals to change the benefits system to universal credit. 25% are about housing, access to social housing, of which there is a shortage in Boston; good and bad experiences of hospital; the child support agency; tax; social services; local authority services; and national issues. I try to ensure that the people who see me have exhausted all other channels in order to give the state a chance to respond.

It is quite rare that someone comes to see me at the surgeries just to talk about immigration and only one letter or e-mail a month concerns immigration; it is a very small number. That doesn't mean it is not a serious issue, but it is not one of the top issues that people in the borough are concerned about.

When did you first become aware of the rise in tension within the community over migration from Eastern Europe?

Tension from immigration happened before the eastern European immigration in 2004/05, certainly with the Portuguese. The riots in 2004 were partly due to the heat and excess alcohol, but there was underlying tension too. There has been significant effort from institutions leading to greater understanding and community cohesion. I think the tension has lessened; there is an acceptance by the majority in Boston that migrants are here to work and if they are here legitimately and pay their taxes they are welcome.

I think there was clearly a big mistake on the part of the previous Government in not taking on 'derogation powers' in 2004, which prevented people from the A8 countries that joined the EU from having free movement until 2011. Only the UK, Sweden and Ireland didn't take that on, so migrant workers were effectively funnelled into this country and it was significant in comparison. In April 2001 those derogation powers ran out so people can now work in the other EU countries and that is slowly starting to happen.

When did you first raise concerns in public – e.g. local newspapers etc and in the House of Commons?

In the 2001 General Election before I became an MP. I had a constant battle for Boston to ensure it received the requisite resources and that was with all-party support; this is an on-going issue still which we are working together to address. I raised it in my maiden speech in June 2001 and in Prime Minister's Questions in 2004 and on 16th December 2011 I raised the issue, solutions and high-lighted the issues across services with respect to the population far exceeding the population figures.

Is there anything the Government could do to improve the image of agricultural work as a career choice?

Yes. It is intriguing that applications to agriculture colleges are oversubscribed, i.e. that is the academic side. It is a real challenge for people who want to get into farming who can't afford a farm. Lincolnshire's land is valuable and in 2001 a farm would be viable if it had 500 acres, but now it needs 1000. How do we encourage local people to see that agricultural work is a worthwhile career? Defra and the NFU have put money towards encouraging people to understand the career progression, apprenticeships and that working in the sector is not necessarily demeaning or low-grade even though it is to start with. This is the failing of recent policy. Local young men asked me when I would be putting a stop on migration and I replied when you are prepared to work in the packhouses and fields.

We hear that the government is going to remove the initial inspection under the GLA licensing regime. What protection will workers have from unscrupulous gangmasters? Do you think this will potentially lead to more unscrupulous gangmasters setting up?

As background, I was instrumental in the Gangmasters' Licensing Authority coming in to operation and it is not perfect but it is positive, getting rid of a lot of illegal activity. Coming to power in 2010, the Coalition Government had to stabilise the economic situation and reduce departmental budgets, and so it was for Defra. Money for flood defences were protected as this is so important. Defra has 30% less than in May 2010, which means there has to be focus and so the focus is on gangers who are known rogue operators. Some are extremely 'entrepreneurial'! There has to be fair recompense and that is why the GLA was set up. I hope they will focus on the known criminal and exploitative activity that is taking place. There is still organised crime and trafficking people through Europe. The GLA is in a 'consultation period' and I will watch its performance rigorously to ensure it has the right focus.

Do you support the licensing of all HMOs?

Yes. I have very strongly urged the council to do this for a considerable time. It is a resource issue, but is a problem especially in the centre of the town. There is a lady in her 80s who is the only UK citizen in her street and she doesn't understand the drinking, noise, disturbance from shift workers coming home during the night and I am very sympathetic. Licensing all HMOs would be a very positive step and I urge the council to do this and I will work with the council to find additional resources.

[The Chairman confirmed that the council is consulting on the Housing Strategy, which would be finalised on 24 September, and is looking at the Oxford model of full cost recovery. The council will take it forward and wants public support.]

That is good; encouraging. It is not until you have a self-funding licensing scheme that you will be able to do something about rogue landlords; it is only a matter of time until there is a disaster.

Do you think we need a drinks ban for Boston?

Extending the Designated Public Place Order through the town and borough is a matter for the police; it is a public order issue. If there's a ban in the Market Place, it moves the problem elsewhere. There is particularly an issue with young people 'tanking up' on alcohol at home so that they are already drunk when they come out. That is the reason why the Government has put a minimum price on alcohol. I don't think it's practical; instead we need zero tolerance of bad behaviour. It is not just an issue relating to migrants; there is *no* evidence to support the idea that is mostly migrants; in fact, quite the reverse. There is a lady who owns stalls in the town centre who says that people buy alcohol at 7 am and are paralytic by 9 am and they have collapsed, but when asked if they were Polish she said no, they are all English.

Do you think we need any changes made regarding EU migration? If what changes need to be made?

We need to reduce the level of migration into the UK. This is a key plank of Government policy and net migration will be reduced from the 100 thousands to the 10s of thousands by 2013. In the early years of the previous administration anyone was let in at any time, which was a real disaster as well as derogation, though some Labour ministers tried to put it right later.

Do we need some migrant workers? Yes. Do we need migrant workers with appropriate skills to fill the skills gap? Yes. So we need to look at what and how much rather than should we have any. We have made significant progress in the last two years already in terms of reducing migration from outside the EU. The biggest challenge is migration from inside the EU.

We have more UK citizens outside the UK, with 1.1m living in the EU. We have 870,000 people from A8 countries in the UK, so if they were reversed we would have more people living in the UK.

The direction of travel is to ensure that people are coming here to work, pay taxes and contribute to the community and not to use the benefits system. There is an enormous dispute between the Government and the UK Commission; the Government is trying to stop migrants from getting benefits they're not entitled to.

It is very difficult to say what the number of migrants is. The Office of National Statistics says there are 7,500-8,000 more than are registered. I feel it is significantly more: 15-20,000. None of these are registered in the funding formula. Most are working and contributing. The level of unemployment in Boston and Skegness is 2,600 and there are effectively 1,300 in Boston. If we got rid of 10,000 migrants who would do the work?

The recently published Government Alcohol Strategy states the evidential burden for Cumulative Impact Policies will be reduced and off-licences will be clearly included within the scope of policies. Does this go far enough to control alcohol sales and numbers of premises at a local level and have the Government considered devolving the responsibility down to Licensing Authorities to set limits on the number of off-licences based on need?

I don't think there is enough control of on- and off-licensing. I have been lobbied vociferously by councillors and officers. I have talked to Home Office ministers about it, but they are bit reluctant about complete local autonomy because before, local authorities saw it as an opportunity to make income, resulting in more licences than fewer. The direction of travel is a more localist agenda, so let's keep lobbying, but it won't be imminent.

Are you able to provide an update on what has happened following the House of Commons debate on 12 December 2011?

There are four key points to make. Firstly, education; we need to expand school places. Lincolnshire County Council has been very supportive and provided £4.8m

for more school places. The Government recognises the complexity regarding education in a multi-lingual environment. It is very challenging for teachers and schools are starting to employ teaching assistants with languages.

Secondly health; the national budget is ring fenced though there will be changes to how the health service works and how resources are spent. There needs to be greater focus with respect to money going to GPs for their patients and Pilgrim Hospital, which is making progress with hard work and investment. The health minister, Andrew Lansley, recently made a visit to Pilgrim and Skegness Hospitals regarding schemes for further funding.

With respect to housing services, the Chief Executive and Leader of Boston Borough Council went to see the housing and local government minister, who promised that he would visit Boston and we are awaiting that visit.

The situation is challenging. The next Comprehensive Spending Review will take place in 2013 so the report of the task and finish group is so important to feed into the collective views of the borough. I also want to speak to No. 10 regarding the impact of migrant workers on the area. You are doing some very important work.

The issues are very complicated and very important and it is important to get my answers correct. You need full responses and any we don't have time for I will give a full written response.

Questions from members of the public

When was the last time you spent a night in the Boston home you claim to own when we all know you reside in Putney?

I don't accept the premise of the question; I do live in the borough, though I won't give my address, and, of course, I have a base in London.

Why do you refuse our request to view firsthand the problems we are facing in Boston despite constant invitations? We will take you and show you the human excrement, the cans, the benches – we take photos daily. Come to us and see it firsthand.

Again, I don't accept the premise of the question; there clearly are problems and I said so before I was elected. I have not refused any invitations. I spend an enormous amount of time with people with a wide range of views. There are people in Boston who think there should be more migrant workers, because they don't get the staff they need. I know one business man who says he is going to go to Europe in order to find more himself. I agree 100% that there are problems; anti-social behaviour as you allude to, defecation etc; it is completely unacceptable and we need to work to ensure it is minimised; it is appalling. Shopkeepers see me about problems and I immediately report the problems to the council and the police and something is done within 24 hours. Some of it, but not all, stems from migrants.

Will you accept our invitation to come with us to the 'grot spots'?

Yes, but in a balanced way. I have never refused. I know where the grot spots are; I have seen them. I am plugged in with the council and the Home Office about people being removed, alcohol and drug dependency etc. Please note that migrants can be removed after 3 months if they have not worked, but we don't enforce it! That is, if they have not worked and do not have a genuine prospect of work; someone who is not engaging with the job centre etc – they have no right to stay.

After being sexually attacked on Saturday afternoon by a group of EU men what are you going to do to protect local women from further racist attacks? There is a lot of sexual and violent attacks by foreign nationals on English people.

I am very sorry to hear about that; that's terrible. Firstly, you must report it to the police who I hope are investigating it and those people are caught and punished. I have long argued for much greater police presence both at night and during the day. Often it is fear that is the problem. The police are aware and trying to do something about it. It is also to do with resources. I have spoken with them about it ad nauseum.

Seeing how bad things have got in the UK because of migration why are our borders still open and why hasn't EU migration been capped to allow us to cope with what is already here?

Firstly, that is illegal under EU law. Secondly, there is no record of any kind regarding an appropriate EU ceiling. I have some sympathy with your view. Some in Government – not Conservatives – believe we need more migrant workers; they believe it will improve growth. I don't subscribe to that view. Clearly, most migrants in Boston are from the EU but the 1974/75 referendum took us into the EU. Since the election in 2010, no more powers will be given to Brussels without a referendum. I believe the British people have had a say, but they have not had a say on migration.

Why did you vote against having a referendum?

If you mean a referendum about the Lisbon Treaty, there was no point. If you mean the vote in the House of Commons one year ago about the motion in relation to a petition, there were three ways we could vote: give more powers to Brussels; maintain the status quo; or come out of the EU. The result could have been 33% voting to give more powers to Brussels and that is not what I want. I can't think of anything more irresponsible than a referendum on whether to stay in or come out of the EU when we are so economically unstable.

What are the government's plans to cope with all these new arrivals as no provisions were made for them coming so jobs, schools, housing all in short supply?

This is down the failing of the current funding formulas; they need to be much fairer for all our services. I would like to see Government much more responsive with respect to the population. The population may decrease again; some will go back and some will settle. We have to get used to a more dynamic, broader society.

Boston's population on paper is far outweighed by what is actually here and there for we are underfunded and struggling to cope with the extra population so what have you done as our representative to rectify this?

I've been lobbying, and with some success: in 2004 the East Lindsey Primary Care Trust got an increase in its budget for one year and in 2010, I lobbied about investment in the hospital, college and schools, but that is just the beginning of the process. What about the future? The Office of National Statistics predicts that Boston will be joint first with Corby (outside London) in terms of increased population; that's the highest percentage and it's due to immigrants having children. How accurate is that? Why do they come? Most come for work; what if it dries up? With the advance of technology we won't need packers, planters and cutters and so if the jobs aren't there...I don't know.

We have seen the population of Boston virtually double in the past decade due mainly to the mass influx of migrants from the EU. We see the strain this has put on local services, the social imbalance and the impact this has had on the Town and its indigenous population; as an example the County Council are having to spend a further 5 million this year on enlarging four Boston schools and plans are under way to build an extra new school in Boston, this is all due to the population explosion created by the open door policy to migrants. With the strong possibility of the withdrawal of Greece and all this would imply, i.e. even more migrants entering the UK, is it not time the government woke up to the fact we are full to breaking point? Why are local people paying for immigrant children; why isn't the EU paying?

The money is not raised locally; the vast bulk comes from Government taxation. A new law will enable uniform business rates so we can keep more. Particularly with respect to the health service, it is an EU-wide agreement; where a foreign national uses health care we are reimbursed by the home country. In theory that is what happens, not always in practice; it is taking up a lot of focus to try to get the money back.

Please note: the maternity unit at Pilgrim Hospital would not be viable without migrant births (nearly 40%), though it is outdated.

In terms of the relationship between benefits and tax – there is no question that the balance is significantly in favour of taxation. You have to be absent from the UK for six months to avoid UK tax.

Migrants should not be able to claim child benefit. The Department for Work and Pensions is currently self-assessing it like disability living allowance.

When David Cameron was canvassing for the election he promised a more open democratic government, one of the things he promised was, we the electorate had the right to ask for a debate via an e-petition. So why was it when an e-petition asking for a referendum on leaving the EU was presented, the government instructed MPs not to allow it? It's not very democratic to direct MPs not to have a debate.

We did have a debate; that's what the e-petition forced. Those 100,000 people wanted to have a referendum but 100,000 people may want to bring back hanging; does that mean we should automatically do it? Of course not! My constituents elected me, but there are other views to mine and people can stand against me. I believe that if we permanently have referendums then MPs are abdicating responsibility. There are significant advantages to being in the EU.

The country has massive debts, social deprivation and unemployment, including thousands of unemployed immigrants, yet you can spend, by next year, 12 billion on foreign aid and 12 billion into bailing out the Euro. Is this a good way to spend the tax payers' money?

There is no question that UK tax is not used to bail out the Euro. Under the previous Labour Government, it was put into the tax structure; the first thing our chancellor did was to remove us from that. We are not allowed to prop up currencies, just countries; there is a massive difference.

When I was a shadow minister in international development, I saw firsthand some of the horrific lives of some human beings. Just 1.1% of Government spending goes on foreign aid to provide water and basic necessities for people, including children. Yes, we have to ensure it is spent on what it is meant for. Government transparency is preventing corruption. The money saves one life every two minutes.

In recent months senior members of the Tory party have expressed how multiculturalism doesn't work and how British employers should look to employing our own nationality ahead of immigrants. Do you agree with your party line on this and, after the pre election promises on reducing immigration, what reasons do you have on the failure to achieve the numbers claimed the Conservatives would if elected?

The election pledge was made to cover the life of this parliament. Net migration has reduced from non-EU immigrants. Net migration overall has gone up because of the hangover from the previous administration so I hope you will see an improvement before the next parliament.

Multiculturalism is not a great success. Immigrants are able to lead separate lives and become isolated. I am keen that people who come to this country should be able to speak the language and understand our traditions etc. I don't think it is such an issue here. The Government is keen that immigrants understand our way of life, for example through the citizenship test.

It is illegal for employers to discriminate. The French are especially good at giving contracts to French companies. Since around 1998, the majority of new jobs have been taken by migrants. Why? It is partly a UK problem; lack of appropriate skills, education, aspiration and ambition, and the benefits system. Many people have contacted me about getting to grips with the benefits system to ensure that work always pays.

With not been of local origin and obviously due to the occupational hazard of MPs having to spend a lot of time in London. Do you feel that is a valid point on how

locals are seeing you as being out of touch with how they feel on immigration when you spend so little actual time in Boston?

I don't accept the premise of the question; I spend an enormous amount of time in the constituency. I go to London on a Monday morning and return here on a Thursday night. There is a running three-line whip in the Commons and I have to be available at any time. Boston is a part of my constituency; there are 92 villages apart from the two towns and with the changes to boundaries the constituency will get even bigger. It is a very big challenge to be everywhere within its 346 square miles. But I take my constituency responsibilities very seriously. I do the work and I believe that all would acknowledge that.

I am very well aware of your views, but you shouldn't assume that it is a uniform view; it is not here in Boston either. I believe the majority believe that if migrants are here legally and legitimately and they are working then they should be part of the community.

Would you agree that the negatives far outweigh the positives of mass immigration our community has suffered in recent years and that there is only the minority such as the employers and landlords who have prospered greatly whilst normal grass roots townfolk have suffered severely in so many ways and the town is not as safe?

Of course, a significant influx has an impact on lives, especially in the centre. Anti-social behaviour and having the resources to deliver public services appropriately need to be addressed further. There have been positive aspects of migration – market stall holders will tell you that the people who go to them are mostly migrants.

What changes have your family and yourself noticed due to the effects of EU migration in Boston and the surrounding area and what were your EU migrant neighbours like in your old house, 5 Church Close, Boston in the seven years since you have been our MP? All your neighbours stated that they never saw you or your family.

We used the house reasonably regularly when we stayed here, but we've now moved. If you are trying to imply I have not done my work properly, I resent that. Our neighbours were mixed. There were occasions when there was noise but it was very rare. Some of the anti-social behaviour in that area isn't all down to migrants. The worst incident was when some local youths were bullying a migrant. There is no simplistic answer; it involves dealing with anti-social behaviour, policing matters, an understanding of the way people live etc.

What effects will there be on Boston when Turkey and the other countries join the EU, re further EU migrants coming into the area and why are the Conservative Party supporting this?

There is no proposition for Turkey to join the EU in the immediate future; it will have to satisfy the EU's 'Copenhagen criteria' first and it is a long way off that, but it is preferable to have Turkey turning westward and becoming more democratic. There would be derogation for a significantly long time and its government is aware of that. It is out of the question not to have derogation; there is great poverty in rural Turkey.

The effects of EU migration is stretching our schools, hospitals, police, courts, housing and services to breaking point, keeping local British people out of work, whilst the EU Migrants living in multi occupancies are sending up to 90% of their wages back to Poland, and then claiming all their Tax and NI back that they have paid in the UK, so how is EU migration a good thing for Boston?

The premise of the question is not accurate. With respect to access to jobs and work, I talked to two local employers – one in agriculture, one in retail – who recently advertised jobs. The agricultural employer said 150 migrants applied and only 3 UK citizens, 2 of whom didn't turn up and one wasn't suitable. The retail employer said that no UK citizens applied for the jobs.

There are cost pressures and the overheads of a single migrant without children are less. But I agree with the minimum wage, which gives a higher return on capital, which results in expansion, which results in more jobs. When will we get rid of the minimum wage? We won't. There is protectionism – putting up barriers, for example putting tax on goods so they won't be bought or on foreign nationals so they won't be employed; that was what happened in the 30s. Free markets are best. Goods and services outside the EU can't get in and that's how to drive efficiency etc.

[The Chairman said the task and finish group will be writing a report and will work with Mr Simmonds and consult the public on it and the action plan it will contain. He thanked Mr Simmonds for attending and answering the questions. Mr Simmonds confirmed that he would respond to the remaining questions.]

The dates of the next meetings were announced as 21st and 27th June 2012.

(The meeting ended at 5.10 pm)