

What can local government do to manage the impact of migration?

William Eichler 01 February 2016

Europe is awash with anti-migrant sentiment. The combination of economic turbulence, terrorism and the Syrian refugee crisis has created a groundswell of fear and doubt - which manifests itself in support for xenophobic political parties. These, in their turn, have made an art form of dragging mainstream opinion further to the right, and into a place where previously liberal people start toying with ideas everyone hoped were long dead in Europe.

It is not necessarily racist or xenophobic to be concerned about the impact of immigration. It is the form this 'concern' sometimes takes that is the problem. So, what can local authorities do to prevent the genuine worries of individuals morphing into something more pernicious? How can they help ease the social tensions that sometimes emerge as a result of migration? A report, published last November by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), provides some useful guidance to local government leaders.

IPPR's study, entitled *Trajectory and transience: Understanding and addressing the pressures of migration on communities*, explores the 'lived experiences of ethnic diversity at the local community level'. By 2061 the ethnic minority share of the UK population is projected to be 30% partly because of high birth rates in these communities, and partly because of migration. This means local authorities will, increasingly, be faced with issues relating to social cohesion. It also means debates about immigration need to be productive and steer clear of rhetorical grandstanding.

Easier said than done. Migration is a deeply divisive issue, and there are many political actors that sure up their support with irresponsible utterances. To take just one example: Nigel Farage. The leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) has, like many a populist before him, built a political career on presenting himself as the 'plain spoken everyman'. And he has a lot to say on immigration and diversity.

Speaking on LBC Radio in the aftermath of the terrorist attack against the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, Mr Farage described the attack as the result of 'a really rather gross policy of multiculturalism'. He explained to the interviewer: 'We have encouraged people who come from different cultures to remain within those cultures, and not to integrate fully within our communities.' He then went on to characterise British and French Muslims as a 'fifth column'.

This is not an entirely unreasonable argument. There are many who argue that diversity equals fragmentation, which, they say, inevitably leads to conflict. They worry that multiculturalism undermines the stability provided by a coherent national identity. Instead of rich variety, they see a future of ghettoised communities pitched against one another in a struggle for resources.

But Mr Farage (and he is not alone in this) routinely conflates issues that are either unrelated or only tenuously connected. Above, for example, he draws a link between terrorism, minority communities, and multiculturalism, and finishes with a pernicious term - 'fifth column' - that has historically been used to demonise minorities. By wrapping such offensive arguments up in the guise of legitimate criticisms of multiculturalism, the UKIP leader plays on people's fears and stigmatises certain groups in order to maximise political support. This serves him and his party, but it does nothing to help community relations on the ground.

Phoebe Griffith and Julia Halej, the authors of *Trajectory and transience*, take a more constructive approach and their research gives a rather more nuanced account than is generally heard in the popular domain. By studying Citizenship Survey data (2007–2011), and carrying out on-the-ground research in Slough, Sandwell, Boston and York, four places with very different experiences of migration, they were able to learn about the actual impact of population movements on communities.

They found that in places with a long history of migration and a high ethnic minority share, e.g. Slough and Sandwell, diversity had been 'normalised'. It was a part of everyday life. As one Slough resident put it: 'Despite the fact that you get different groups here...Slough is able to unite even with differences - I think that is a strength that Slough has. We incorporate any newness.'

The picture is different in places where demographic shifts are more recent. During the decade between 2001 and 2011, Boston saw its share of immigrants rise almost fivefold. This created a sense of bitterness amongst the native population. One resident explained: 'People were mumbling and grumbling about the town

changing. "These ethnic shops" were popping up and the town centre was changing in character, with people speaking foreign languages.' There was also concern over the pressure on public services.

The IPPR's findings suggest multiculturalism does not undermine social cohesion. For some places, such as Slough, it is an integral part of the community's collective identity. The problem comes when, as the experience of Boston demonstrates, rapid demographic change shakes up a community, and the authorities and residents struggle to cope.

Contra Farage et al, diversity is not a problem; it is just that the journey towards it can be rocky. In fact, the conclusion to Trajectory and transience is straightforward: 'Our review of British attitudinal data concludes that, in aggregate, considerable demographic change has not had a significant impact on key indicators of social cohesion in the UK in the past decade.'

There is more to it though. IPPR highlights another problem: transience. Research shows that today migrants are staying in the UK for relatively short periods. Due to multiple factors - labour market trends, pressures on housing, increased mobility, EU laws - migrants are less likely to put down roots in one place. This can put pressure on services and infrastructure, and undermines the long-term formation of a collective identity based on diversity.

As Griffith and Halej write: 'Transience inevitably has an impact on people's attachment to a local area and a community's capacity to build links between residents. Higher rates of population turnover mean that there are fewer long-term residents in an area. Turnover can also undermine social networks, erode trust and increase levels of insecurity.'

Transience - or 'population churn' - can create some of the social tensions that parties such as UKIP feed off. And it is not helped by Government policies aimed at discouraging immigrants from settling in one place (for example, current policies that seek to ensure international students leave the UK once they complete their degrees). As the IPPR report puts it: 'Pursuing policies that explicitly set out to break the link between coming to the UK and settling here is counterproductive.'

What, according to the IPPR, can local government do to tackle this? 'Local authorities should formulate strategies setting out how they will respond to demographic change, higher migration and greater diversity. These plans should form the basis for allocation of central government resources (including those set out above) and for public consultations with local residents.'

These strategies should include four basic parts. Firstly, local authorities should work on acquiring a better understanding of trends affecting their populations. Secondly, they should use this knowledge to pre-empt potential pressures relating to social cohesion and services. Thirdly, local services should be suitably prepared to deal with newcomers. They can offer bespoke 'one-stop-shop' services to simplify the integration process and they can also provide cultural awareness training to staff in order to ease interaction with migrants.

Finally, they should engage with their residents through local hearings or citizens' juries, and listen carefully to their concerns. 'These exercises should be as inclusive as possible,' write Griffith and Halej, 'involving those who benefit directly from higher rates of migration (such as local universities and employers) alongside key community groups, faith groups and the general public.'

Despite what irresponsible politicians and pundits claim, diversity and multiculturalism are not undermining the UK. They are, in fact, enhancing it. Crucially, though, central and local government must be pro-active in managing population flows and they must do what they can to mitigate some of the negative consequences of population churn. If they can do this, then everyone will enjoy the benefits that accrue from immigration.

<https://www.localgov.co.uk/What-can-local-government-do-to-manage-the-impact-of-migration/40227> (accessed: 06/12/17)