



The Housing Pathways of Polish New Immigrants in Sheffield

Tamara Gryszel-Fieldsned
Kesia Reeve

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Introduction

This report presents an overview of the experiences of Polish new immigrants in Sheffield interviewed as part of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded project exploring the housing experiences of new immigrants during the first five years of settlement in the UK.

In-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with 39 new immigrants from Poland, Liberia, Pakistan and Somalia. The sample included 10 Polish people - five men and five women, ranging in age from 22 to 55 and all of whom were in paid employment. The majority (eight) were living in private rented accommodation at the time they were interviewed and the remaining two were staying as guests of friends or family. All but one (a full time student) had arrived in the UK seeking employment, but only four were registered with the Workers Registration Scheme. A total of seven respondents were living with a spouse. All defined their ethnicity as Polish and all were practising Roman Catholics.

The History of Polish Immigration into Sheffield

The history of Polish immigration to Sheffield dates back at least as far as 1939 when Polish ex-servicemen and their families settled in the city following the German occupation of Poland. Following the war, Polish workers arrived into Sheffield to work in various industries, including mining, and the numbers of Polish immigrants subsequently increased as a result of the arrival of European Volunteer Workers. A Polish Ex-Service Men's Association and Polish Catholic Club were opened in the west of the city in 1950s to cater for this community and are still operating today. More recently, the Polish population is reported to have grown dramatically following the accession of Poland into the EU in May 2004, drawn to Sheffield by employment opportunities, particularly in transport and construction.

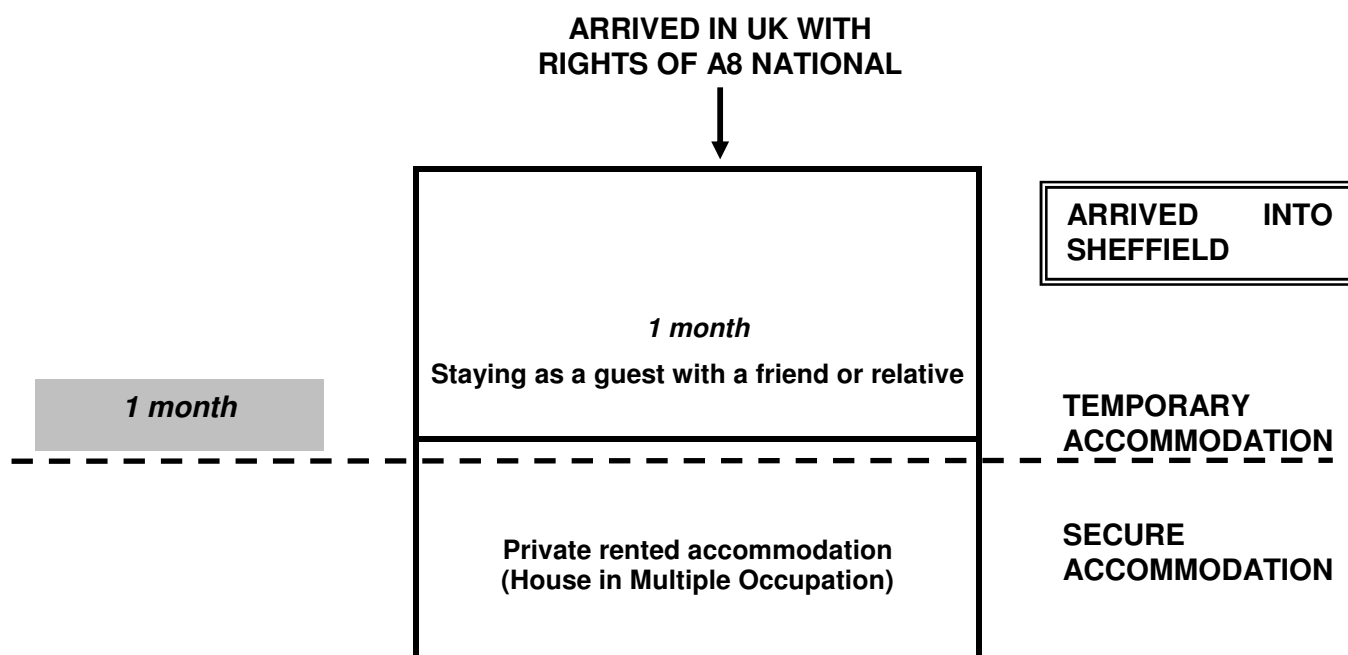
The Housing Careers of Polish New Immigrants

Key Findings

- like many new immigrants, the early housing careers of Polish migrant workers are characterised by insecure accommodation situations
- with restricted access to the benefits provided by the welfare state, and with no formal organisational support, Polish new immigrants are entirely reliant upon their own financial and social resources to negotiate access to accommodation
- Polish new immigrants tend to be concentrated in the private rented sector and most managed to secure a tenancy within a month of arrival into Sheffield.

The majority of the Polish new immigrants interviewed arrived into insecure housing situations, an experience they share with other new immigrant groups (Liberian and Somali respondents, for example, also arrived into temporary accommodation situations). Their arrival accommodation therefore represented little more than a temporary staging post *en route* to a more secure situation. Despite this insecurity most Polish people interviewed had managed to arrange their temporary accommodation prior to leaving Poland. Unlike the Somali asylum seekers interviewed, for example, no Polish respondent arrived in the UK unsure about where they would spend their first night. Typically, respondents had relatives or friends in Sheffield (mostly Polish new migrants themselves) with whom they could stay temporarily. Although a time limit was rarely placed upon these arrangements, respondents began the search for more secure housing almost immediately and consequently Polish people's length of stay in their initial accommodation rarely lasted longer than one month (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Exemplar Polish Housing Career: From Arrival to Secure Accommodation



Polish new immigrants arrive with a particular package of rights and opportunities. Unlike the Somali asylum seekers interviewed but in common with the Liberian refugees and Pakistani chain migrants, they have the right to work upon entering the UK. Their rights with regard to the benefits provided by the welfare state are, however, very limited. In particular, A8 migrants cannot access unemployment benefits or social housing until they have completed 12 months continuous employment whilst registered with the Workers Registration Scheme. With no organisational support or assistance (for example to parallel the support Somali and Liberian respondents received from NASS and the Gateway Protection Programme) Polish respondents were entirely reliant upon their own financial and social resources to negotiate access to more secure accommodation. Within this context it is not surprising that they focused their attention exclusively on the private rented sector.

Following a relatively brief period spent in a temporary accommodation situation, all the Polish new immigrants interviewed went on to secure a private rented tenancy, typically a house in multiple occupation. Awareness of opportunities was often reliant on word of mouth, with some respondents moving into tenancies vacated by other Polish people. Subsequent moves within this sector were commonplace (in contrast to respondents in all other groups whose housing careers tended to stabilise once longer-term accommodation was secured), usually prompted by a change in circumstances such as the arrival of a spouse and/or dependent children, or a decision to remain in the UK for longer than originally intended. This usually represented a move into a more desirable or appropriate situation such as accommodation in better condition, in a more desirable location, or which was self contained.

Polish respondents' geography of settlement tends to reinforce the settlement patterns of other recent Polish arrivals into Sheffield, reflecting the apparent reliance of Polish new immigrants on friends and family for their initial accommodation and on word of mouth and social networks for subsequent tenancies. The emerging residential cluster of Polish new immigrants around the 'Abbeydale Corridor' also reflects their reliance on the private rented sector. Cheap private rented accommodation is readily available in this area, a diverse

neighbourhood with a history of accommodating students, many of whom are moving into new purpose built flats recently developed in adjacent areas.

Housing Situations and Experiences

Key Findings

- Polish new immigrants encountered relatively few problems securing accommodation in the private rented sector, their right to work and relative ease with which most found employment facilitating access to this tenure. Respondents were, however, exposed to unsatisfactory, insecure, and poor living conditions.

The Polish new immigrants interviewed all succeeded in negotiating access to longer-term accommodation relatively soon after their arrival into Sheffield and without experiencing any severe difficulties. Their right to work and the relative ease with which most found employment (assisted by the apparent willingness of local firms to employ Polish immigrants, something which did not appear to apply to the refugees interviewed) provided Polish respondents with the financial resources to secure accommodation in the private sector. Polish respondents were thus able to exercise a degree of choice and control in determining their housing outcomes.

This is not to suggest, however, that the Polish new immigrants interviewed were not exposed to unsatisfactory, insecure, and poor living conditions, echoing findings from other studies which repeatedly point to the poor living conditions experienced by European migrant workers in tied and independent private rented accommodation. Despite apparently encountering few problems *accessing* accommodation, the quality and security of this accommodation was often lacking, reflecting common problems with the lower end of the private rented sector and the vulnerability of immigrant populations to housing exploitation. Respondents were not, for example, always provided with tenancy agreements or aware of their rights as tenants. Housing conditions were often poor, and privacy was an issue, particularly for couples in Houses in Multiple Occupancy. In addition, with restricted access to welfare benefits, Polish respondents' housing security was dependent upon retaining employment. Yet most were working for the minimum wage, in insecure jobs, sometimes for employment agencies which could not guarantee the requisite minimum number of hours per week to generate sufficient income to cover their housing costs. Consequently, many Polish respondents' housing situations were at best precarious, and homelessness was a very real possibility for some.

The Importance of Place

Key Findings:

- The intended temporary nature of Polish new immigrants settlement in the UK is a critical determinant of their attitudes to place
- Polish new immigrants attached very little importance to the place where they lived, instead prioritising housing issues (affordability in particular)
- The importance respondents attached to place sometimes shifted over time, gaining greater importance the longer Polish new immigrants remained in the UK.

In contrast to many of the new immigrants interviewed Polish respondents were relatively indifferent to the nature of the place (city and neighbourhood) in which they lived, instead prioritising housing issues above place related concerns when discussing residential

experiences and preferences. Polish new immigrants had all made a conscious choice to move to Sheffield but few appeared to have paid any mind to the nature of Sheffield as a place to live before they arrived. As one Polish man reflected, *"it just happened that we ended up here"*. Similarly, when discussing neighbourhood choices and preferences in the early stages of settlement respondents tended to report that the characteristics of the local area were of little interest to them and *"wasn't important at all"*. Rather, the focus was on housing costs, and the priority to secure cheap accommodation.

A number of factors help to explain Polish respondents attitudes to place:

- the primary objective of most Polish respondents was economic gain: to work and accumulate as much money as possible before returning to Poland. Maximising disposable income was therefore a key priority, and securing cheap accommodation was an important part of this strategy. Within this context, residential location becomes relatively unimportant - if accommodation was available and affordable then it was deemed suitable
- the apparent lack of interest in the socio-spatial contours of the city also appeared to be rooted in the self-perception among Polish respondents that they were temporary visitors to Sheffield and the UK. Few had any intention of remaining in the UK for longer than a year or two and so local neighbourhoods were viewed in terms of providing opportunities for affordable housing and as temporary stopping places rather than potential spaces of long-term residence and settlement.

Despite insisting that their place of residence was of no major concern, some respondents did point to the benefits associated with living in a neighbourhood where other Polish new immigrants reside. Marzena, for example, explained that she felt happier after moving to Abbeydale Road because *"there are lots of Poles here. There is someone to talk to, somebody to visit"*. She also reported a greater sense of safety and confidence and felt more able to move freely about her local neighbourhood and further afield, explaining that *"I can go into town by myself, we can go for a walk at least with our child, in the park. Now it's better [than before]"*.

There is also evidence that Polish new immigrants' attitudes may shift over time, usually in response to a decision to remain in the UK for longer than originally intended. Andrzej, for example originally planned to work in the UK for a short period of time before returning to his wife and child in Poland, having ensured the financial security of the family. His plans soon changed, however, and Andrzej decided to remain in the UK for the foreseeable future. Consequently his wife and child moved from Poland to join him. Discussing the early phases of his housing career, Andrzej was adamant that the neighbourhood in which he lived was of little concern and expressed no particular views about the local area. As long as he was able to work and his accommodation was affordable he was content. However, having made the decision to settle in Sheffield this began to change: he grew dissatisfied with the neighbourhood and his attention turned to *"finding something nicer...we decided to change to something better and somewhere quieter too"*. In contrast to previous moves, he took his time viewing properties and carefully considered where they might relocate to. Financial considerations remained relevant but location and housing quality entered his considerations in a way which they had not done previously.

Polish new immigrants in Sheffield reported few problems with harassment or abuse. It is difficult to unpick the reasons for these experiences, which contrast so sharply with those of many Liberian and Somali new immigrants. One obvious explanation is that Polish new immigrants do not stand out as readily by virtue of being White. Polish migrant workers have also received a largely favourable press since their arrival following the accession of Poland to the EU in 2004, especially when compared to the less welcoming reception that has greeted refugees and asylum seekers. This has not, however, prevented Polish new

immigrants from being the target of abuse and harassment, particularly in rural and other less diverse areas across the UK.

Engaging with the Housing System

Key Findings:

- in contrast to many new immigrants, Polish respondents became actively engaged with the housing system immediately upon arrival in the UK
- Polish new immigrants are entirely reliant on their own resources and resourcefulness to meet their housing needs
- social and community networks were a vital resource for Polish new immigrants, facilitating access to accommodation.

In contrast to Pakistani, Liberian and Somali new immigrants, Polish respondents became actively engaged with the UK housing system immediately upon arrival. Entirely reliant on their own resourcefulness to meet their housing needs, and focusing their accommodation search exclusively on the private rented sector, their institutional or organisational engagement was very limited. No Polish new immigrant, for example, reported approaching advice services or similar agencies for help, instead drawing on informal networks of friends and associates, approaching lettings agencies (usually on the advice and direction of friends) and searching websites and more traditional information sources, including newspapers and community notice-boards.

Polish new immigrants in Sheffield did talk about problems caused by a lack of adequate funds and limited English language skills but they emerged as the group best placed and most able to exercise a degree of choice in the determining their housing situation in the early period of settlement in the UK. Networks of kith and kin were revealed to be a particularly important resource for Polish new immigrants within this context. These networks were relatively informal, word of mouth communications serving as a key source of information facilitating access to housing, a finding that chimes with evidence to emerge from other studies exploring access routes into housing pursued by Polish and other European migrant workers. These informal networks and mutual assistance appeared to have generated a local 'accommodation circuit', which was heavily utilised. Indeed, several respondents reported renting from Polish landlords or having had a tenancy in shared accommodation with other Polish people. Respondents also talked about hearing about forthcoming vacancies via Polish friends or colleagues and contacting landlords before rooms for rent were advertised. Constant churning appears to be a feature of this micro-market, with informal networks within the Polish new immigrant population lubricating the regular movement of people in and out of shared accommodation.

The importance of such chains of support to the residential mobility of new immigrants can also reflect the limited knowledge that many respondents displayed regarding the operation of the housing system. Polish respondents admitted to knowing little about the social rented sector, for example, although a degree of understanding and awareness did appear to be accumulating with time.

About the Study Team

The study was undertaken by Rionach Casey, Kesia Reeve and David Robinson from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University. The Polish interviews were conducted in partnership with Tamara Gryszel-Fieldsned

For More Information

The full report - The Housing Pathways of New Immigrants - by David Robinson, Kesia Reeve and Rionach Casey is available free to download from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation; www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop. The summary reports profiling the experiences of the different new immigrant populations surveyed (Liberian, Somali, Pakistani and Polish) are available to download free from the CRESR website; http://www.shu.ac.uk/cresr/publications/publication_downloads.html.