

# Migrant worker information sheet



Compiled by the South Tyrone  
Empowerment Programme  
[www.stepni.org](http://www.stepni.org)

**D**id you know that between 2-3% of the Northern Ireland population is now made up from migrant workers?

Despite the fact that migrant workers occupy an important role within our community, many of us know very little about them.

The South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP) have compiled this information sheet, outlining some of the key facts about the migrant worker community in Northern Ireland.

If you have any further questions, we would like to hear from you.  
Send us an email with your question to  
**[michael@stepni.org](mailto:michael@stepni.org)**

**Here are some of our most frequently asked questions...**

## ***What is a migrant worker?***

The **Department of Employment and Learning** defines a migrant worker as “*someone from outside the UK and Ireland who is here to seek or take up work*”.

## ***How many migrants are in Northern Ireland?***

It's difficult to calculate the number of migrant workers in Northern Ireland, as there are no accurate measuring mechanisms available. Distribution across Northern Ireland is also uneven, so while around 2-3% of the population are estimated to be non-local, this is as high as 10% in the Dungannon area.

### **Key facts**

- Since 2004, the population of Northern Ireland has been growing by approximately 1% per year (compared with 0.4% before 2004), largely due to migration.
- The number of children born to non-UK or Irish mothers has increased from 3% in 2001 to 9% in 2008.
- One official estimate of the number of Eastern Europeans residing in Northern Ireland stands at between 23,000 and 30,000.

### ***Where are they from?***

Historically, migration has always occurred to and from this country. We have a significant Chinese minority in Northern Ireland and a Portuguese-speaking migrant community mainly in the Dungannon area.

Since 2004, Eastern European people have come here to work - mainly people from Poland and Lithuania, with smaller numbers from the Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Latvia and Russia.

### ***What languages do they speak?***

The most common languages spoken (other than English) are Polish, Lithuanian, Portuguese and Tetum (the language of East Timor), with smaller numbers of Slovak, Russian, Chinese languages (Cantonese and Mandarin), Hungarian, Bulgarian and Czech.



### ***Why are they here?***

Migrant workers came to Northern Ireland primarily to fill specific labour needs that could not be fulfilled locally. Junior Minister at the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister Jeffrey Donaldson emphasised their important role, by stating, “let me be clear: migrant workers in our society are net contributors to the growth of the Northern Ireland economy and society”.

Studies in the European Union, Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and locally in the Dungannon area have concluded that migrants make a significant positive contribution to the European, UK, Irish and Northern Irish economies.

### ***Where do they work?***

Migrant workers can work anywhere where there is a shortage of skills. The jobs migrants carry out are mostly those for which local people either do not have the suitable skills and qualifications, or jobs which local people are unwilling to do. Some of their main areas of work in Northern Ireland include:

- hospitality,
- construction,
- agriculture,
- medical, and
- the food production agency.



*Migrant workers help us to bridge many of the skills gaps in Northern Ireland...*

## **Why don't they go home now we have a recession?**

Citizens of the European Union have a right to live and work in any Member State, (a state belonging to the EU) just as people from Northern Ireland do elsewhere. While some of us might assume that migrant workers go home when there is less work available, there is no historical basis for this. In fact, from looking at other migration periods around the world, most migrants have remained. This is true of Irish migrants to the USA, migration to Ireland in the 1970s and remains the trend for migrants in Northern Ireland today.

Furthermore, many migrants cannot go home, even if they chose to. Most of them may have had to borrow money in order to migrate, and with economic conditions in their home countries being worse than over here, the probability of getting a job back where they have come from remains low, as many of these jobs have been filled by migrants from elsewhere.

## ***What rights do they have?***

Migrants have the same rights as anybody else. All people, regardless of status or employment, have fundamental rights - all employment, social, economic and political rights that we have apply to migrants also.

UK worker regulations treat people differently according to where they come from and what documentation they have; for example, people from the original 15 EU states are treated differently to those who joined in 2004 and those who joined in 2007, and people from outside the EU are treated differently again. This usually means some people cannot get certain non-contributory benefits or no benefits at all if they are not working.

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