

# Research Paper

## The Employment of Migrant Labour in the East Midlands

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**Disclaimer**

The views in this report are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect those of Acas. Any errors or inaccuracies are the responsibility of the authors alone.

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## SUMMARY

### *Introduction*

- The East Midlands have been a significant destination for migrant workers from the EU Accession States. This study is a preliminary investigation into the impact the employment of migrant workers has had on employers' practices in the management of human resources and the employment relationship.
- We have explored three case studies – FurnitureCo, BusCo, and Fire & Rescue - to indicate the changes which have occurred in management practice. These cases represent manufacturing, services and the public sector and also differing approaches to management practice. Cases were based on semi-structured interviews carried out between April and July 2008.

### *The Cases*

- FurnitureCo has gone through changes in production and employment practices abolishing overtime and piecework and moving to lean production techniques and supplying catalogue companies. This led to the company having difficulty recruiting labour in the local labour market.
- BusCo initially a family firm had recently been taken over by a European multinational. Labour shortages had been caused in part because drivers were expected to work very long hours.
- Fire and Rescue employs part-time, retained, fire-fighters recruited from local rural communities and expected to be on-call for up to 120 hours a week. However recruitment has become more difficult as communities have largely transformed into commuter belt with remaining local industry recruiting large numbers of migrant workers.

### *Recruitment*

- Each case organisation had generally been dependent on relatively informal mechanisms to recruit labour. F&R was dependent on recruiting locally, while FurnitureCo and BusCo turned to recruitment in A8 countries. BusCo had already recruited drivers from Malta.
- F&R had to recruit its retained fire-fighters from the local labour market given the need for workers to be easily accessible on call. They had recruited two bilingual Polish administrative workers who helped in preventative work in local workplaces where large numbers of migrants were employed. Attempts were made to promote the recruitment of migrant as a part of the preventative work at these workplace visits.
- BusCo and FurnitureCo both recruited directly from EU states. BusCo initially recruited drivers from Malta but later sending managers to Poland with FurnitureCo targeting A8 countries through the employment service. FurnitureCo had recently recruited through an agency but found this unsatisfactory in attracting workers with the required skills and attitude.
- There was some suspicion by managers at the time of the interviews, in mid 2008, that because of declining exchange rates, job opportunities, and improved labour market at home, there was likely to be less migration from A8 countries and existing workers were more likely to return home.

### *Integration of Migrant Workers*

- We might distinguish between two types of migrant worker; those migrants who move from home with ambition to earn as much as possible with intention to quickly return home, while the other type intend a more permanent migration with greater integration into local communities.
- Anxieties from managers that the recruitment of migrant workers might cause tension within the workforce proved unfounded. Some of the anticipated causes for such tension were based on a perceived contrast in 'work ethic' between migrant and local workers.
- While managers were often critical of the behaviour of their established workforce, they tended to be tolerant towards the misbehaviour of migrant workers, attributing this behaviour to cultural differences.

### *Employer Assistance*

- The defining feature of migrants is that they have moved away from home and as such they have also become distanced from any kinship and social support networks, and have now to navigate an alien system of assistance and welfare.
- Employers' preparedness for the amount of support they would need to offer incoming migrant workers varied. BusCo made special arrangements for migrant workers to take extra leave as well as providing accommodation. In contrast, FurnitureCo had initially thought they would not need to provide any special assistance although, in the event, they did offer considerable help with accommodation and wider welfare for their migrant workforce.
- Each of the case study organisations attempted some involvement in language training and translation, principally because of safety at work, but all on a very limited scale. However no formal language training was available for employees through work and arrangements that had been made through local colleges had not proved successful. While accommodation was made for language difficulty, for instance in safety material in induction training, only limited translation of materials and documentation was made available. Translation facilities could be drawn on in some circumstances often informally through bilingual employees.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

This study examines the employment of migrant workers from the accession states of the A8 countries in the East Midlands region of England following the enlargement of the European Union in 2004. The agriculture and food processing centres in the east of the region have been a major attraction for migrants seeking work in the UK, although such workers can be found across most sectors of the local economy (AMR, 2006). One estimate, based on worker registration and national insurance, gives the number of migrants entering the UK in the three years from 2004 to 2007 as 720,000, with the majority coming from Poland (ICoCo, 2007). A study for the East Midland Development Agency, covering the period from 2004 to 2006, indicated some 38,000 migrants were employed in the region with the large urban centres of Nottingham and Leicester as well as Boston and South Holland favoured destinations (Green *et al.*, 2007).

The purpose of the study was not to explore the number of migrants entering the national or regional labour market but to examine the impact of this migration on employment relations and the human resource practices of employers in the East Midlands. Essentially we sought an initial exploration as to first why employers had moved to employ migrants from the A8 countries, second where the employment of migrant workers had led to new recruitment and selection processes, and third changes that had been contingent on employing migrant workers. Also, and given the general image of migrant workers having to tolerate poor conditions of employment<sup>1</sup>, we wished to explore what might be considered good practice in the employment of migrant workers by employers offering permanent employment. We have therefore excluded employers using temporary migrant labour for dealing with seasonal fluctuation in demand. Instead we wanted to explore the employment of migrant workers in circumstances where they worked alongside local workers with the same pay and terms and conditions.

Support for the study was gained from the 'Policy Orientated Social Science' research fund at Nottingham Trent University, which covered staffing costs and from the Research and Evaluation Section of Acas which provided funds to cover travel expenses.

The study set out to examine:

- a) Workplace issues arising from the employment of migrant labour, not only from the perspective of employers but also those of migrant employees;
- b) The extent to which employers have developed/adapted their HR policies and practices to address issues associated with the employment of migrant labour, and;
- c) The factors that hinder or support them in meeting the needs of migrant workers and in integrating them into their existent workforce.

Given the limited resources it was decided that more depth would be gained from a small number of intensive case studies rather than a more extensive survey. However, to achieve a spread of sectors we selected three case studies, referred to as FurnitureCo, BusCo, and Fire & Rescue (F&R), to represent manufacture,

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<sup>1</sup> For a critical survey of the conditions worked by migrants see Shelley 2007. The novel by Marina Lewycka (2008) *Two Caravans*, gives a popular representation of the work and living conditions forced on migrant workers.

services and the public sector of the economy. While chosen by the researchers the selection of cases was assisted by attendance at the "Employing Migrant Workers" event in Spalding in September 2007, organised by the East Midland Acas Office. Two of the case study organisations, FurnitureCo and F&R participated in this event and were approached afterwards while BusCo was recruited through other contact. As the research was concerned with the impact on and changes to organisational HR policies and practices, we avoided cases where there was casual employment of migrants or indirect employment through gang-masters or other similar schemes which give rise to some distinct and specific issues concerning the form of labour contract. For this reason the choice of cases studies also avoided agriculture, construction or hotels and catering, where such employment practices are common and have been considered elsewhere<sup>2</sup>. In choosing the cases we therefore targeted organisations where there was an expectation of permanent employment for the migrant workers, integrated and working alongside an established workforce.

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<sup>2</sup> For an account of the impact of employing migrant labour on employers' management of HR in the construction and hotels and catering sectors, see McKay, 2009.

## 2. THE CASE STUDIES

Two of the cases are based on semi-structured interviews with a senior manager with responsibilities for human resourcing strategies, a line manager with direct responsibility for the supervision of migrant workers, and a migrant worker employed by the case study organisation. At BusCo only two interviews – with the HR manager and a migrant worker employed in HR – could be carried out<sup>3</sup>. All eight interviews were carried out between April and July 2008. Interviews lasted around an hour with the longest being over an hour and a half and the shortest about 40 minutes. All were carried out on the organisations' premises during working hours or, in the case of the Fire & Rescue, when all three interviewees – serving fire officers - were available at a station during a training exercise. Table 1 summarises the interviews carried out for the study:

**Table 1: Interviewees**

	HR	Line Manager	Migrant Worker
<i>Fire &amp; Rescue</i>	Recruitment Manager	Station Manager	Retained Firefighter (Polish)
<i>FurnitureCo</i>	HR Manager	Production Manager	Production worker (Slovakia)
<i>BusCo</i>	HR Manager		HR Assistant (Polish)

Interviews were semi-structured and relatively informal and broadly explored the recruitment process, integration of migrant workers into the workforce and wider community, along with any particular assistance or changes to accommodate them. Interviews with managers also addressed: the organisational background and history, particularly that which led to the recruitment of migrants; issues such as skills shortages, organisational change, or work arrangements which were preconditions to the employment of migrants; the normal employment conditions and practices, such as pay and hours of working; as well as changes to employment practice. This last issue led to some consideration of employer involvement in areas such as housing and welfare. Interviews with migrants considered their own background and that of their colleagues, their motives for migration, and their experience of finding work and being in employment in the UK. It also considered their experience of living in the UK, any experiences of poor working or living conditions, as well as prejudice in the wider community.

At the time of the interviews there was a growing sense of economic reversal with signs of recession. Stories were beginning to appear in the media regarding job cuts and migrants returning home because of declining exchange rates against the pound and improving labour market conditions at home (Phillips 2008; Economist 2008). Locally, it was announced that a large food processing plant - a major employer of migrant workers from the A8 countries - was to close with the loss of over seven hundred jobs. These redundancies meant employers appeared to be adjusting their recruitment strategy to a focus on the local labour market rather than a search in the A8 countries.

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<sup>3</sup> An accident to one of the researchers led to a long period of sick leave after which there had been changes in personnel at BusCo. Interviews with a depot manager and a driver were initially arranged but could not take place.

## 2.1 FurnitureCo

FurnitureCo has been on its current site on the outskirts of a market town in the region for about fourteen years. In the years between 2000 and 2003 the company went through a number of major changes. Principally this entailed a move into high volume manufacture of three piece suites to order from major catalogue companies, rather than a wider range of more speculatively produced furniture that had been the main output. This was achieved through the introduction of a just-in-time system<sup>4</sup>, producing three piece suites to order for a limited customer base. Integral to this change, production was reorganised into 'cells' where a team of eight or nine workers became responsible for a stage in the production process. This also allowed some stages in production to be contracted out to other factories; wood kits for the furniture frames being produced in Estonia and seat covers in Lithuania.

Manufacture has been geared to orders and a 'banked hours' system now allows for 'no work days' if no production is required. A more flexible working year helps to accommodate fluctuations in demand. Management also replaced a piecework system, where workers could maximise pay by achieving high levels of output with a flat rate and regular hours. Overtime, another way production workers could greatly enhance pay, has also effectively been abolished. One positive consequence of the replacement of piecework has been a dramatic reduction in the number of accidents which the production manager saw caused by the pressures of the old piece rate payments. Usually relatively minor and involving the use of nail-guns these accidents have reduced from around 80 per week to around six at the time of fieldwork.

The changes to pay and the working arrangements led to considerable discontent in the company with a number of production workers lodging formal grievances about the loss of income and changed conditions, with some progressing to employment tribunals. There had also been overtures from a trade union seeking recognition for the workforce. However, according to managers, the main changes seemed to be the increase of labour turnover and a bad reputation for the company in the local labour market. This reputation meant that, despite promotion at the local Jobcentre, they could not recruit locally. The workforce at the factory remained stable at about 350 employees, although with production up by about fifty per cent, its composition has changed dramatically. There has been a reduction in the number of machinists from 40-50 down to only 10; however the number of upholsterers has doubled to 88. The poor reputation in the local labour market led to the company experiencing difficulties in recruiting labour locally, which was acknowledged by the HR Manager:

*Because we'd taken out piecework and gone through a lot of change, even though we were doing the right things our name wasn't particularly favourable ... so the reputation of the company wasn't very good.*  
(HR Manager)

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<sup>4</sup> Reputedly based in the Toyota production system where components arrive from suppliers 'just-in-time' for assembly rather than being held in stock (Schonberger 1982). The practice has been much criticised in the HR literature for intensifying labour (see e.g. Sewell & Wilkinson 1992).

To recruit they turned to labour from EU countries, first Portugal then A8 countries. There are, at the time of the research, about thirty workers from A8 countries within the cells engaged in production operations.

## **2.2 BusCo**

BusCo had until recently been a family firm run by the founder and his son. Following a decline in private hire business the firm was first floated on the stock market and then taken over by a European based multinational with other interests in transport and waste management. To compensate for the decline in private hire, which traditionally accounted for about 80 per cent of its work, the company had originally sought to diversify into other areas of the contract hire business. Integral to these changes, it also looked to its employment practices. At the time of the changes the company employed around 100-120 drivers, although there was a high level of labour turnover with drivers circulating between competing bus companies. One important issue seemed to be the very long hours expected of bus drivers. Unlike some competing companies, drivers at BusCo were expected to work these long hours of overtime on the basic rate of pay rather than an enhanced overtime rate. A main area of concern for the company was not just the shortage of qualified drivers itself – which, they claim, accounts for the long hours worked – but also performance and behavioural problems amongst those drivers available on the local labour market.

The HR manager reflected that:

*I sat in my office one day with this guy, in for gross misconduct. He said 'You can't sack me'. I thought this guy's right you know, we can't sack him because there is this terrible shortage of bus drivers. I thought we can't allow people to hold a gun to our heads like this any longer.*

Because of the shortages, drivers at BusCo worked very long hours. Whilst the hours worked on some contracts were restricted by legislation and the tachograph<sup>5</sup> some of the drivers appear to have worked over 100 hours a week on some unregulated contracts. Within the context of driver shortages, as well as perceived ill discipline amongst some of its existing drivers, BusCo, along with other Bus Companies (BBC 2005), sought recruitment in the accession states to compensate for the shortage of drivers and other staff.

At the time of the interviews BusCo employed around 85 Polish alongside 80 British drivers and two Maltese drivers. Additionally they employed a number of Polish mechanics and cleaners, and appointed a Polish HR assistant.

## **2.3 Fire & Rescue**

The F&R service includes thirty eight stations covering a predominantly rural area of about 3200 square miles. It employs 750 staff of whom 650 are fire-fighters. As a rural area, 400 of these are part-time, 'retained', fire-fighters:

*The retained part of the Fire and Rescue Service is a group of men and women who are 'on call' to respond to a range of emergencies when their alerter / bleeper sounds. The call may be to fire, flood, road traffic collisions, chemical spills and more. In fact, incidents attended by whole time crews*

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<sup>5</sup> A device fitted to motor vehicles to record the driver's periods of duty.

*are incidents attended by retained crews. Many retained fire-fighters will have other full or part time occupations, but when the call comes they are ready to drop whatever they are doing and become part of a team. They work alongside full time fire-fighters. Although they are 'part-time' they are trained and capable people saving lives and making headlines.*  
(Fire Service, 2009)

Retained fire-fighters are expected to be available for 120 hours per week of on-call time although, because the service now has recruitment problems, they are willing to consider less time from suitable candidates. Only five of the brigade's stations are staffed by full-time fire-fighters. Retained fire-fighters usually require release from their main job to cover any call-out in working time and are expected to work and live within five minutes' reach of the station, possibly extendable to seven minutes. The station manager explained that, "the gold standard candidate for me is someone who is self-employed, he owns a little shop across the road, and he has someone working with him so [they] can jump across to the fire." While dependent on them for emergency calls in rural areas, retained fire-fighters play a much smaller role than their full time colleagues in preventative and protective work carried out by the service.

Predominantly a white male preserve, the fire service has often been criticised for its lack of diversity. As the Fire and Rescue National Framework (2006) indicates:

*The Fire and Rescue Service workforce does not currently reflect the communities it serves. In 2004, only 2.5% of operational staff were women and 2.7% of all staff were from minority ethnic backgrounds.*

At seven per cent, this particular brigade claimed the highest proportion of female officers in the service nationally. The local service also has one of the only three female station managers in the UK.

Two factors seem important in the context of this F&R service and its move to recruit migrant workers as retained fire-fighters. First, although not directly involving the retained fire-fighters, there has been a protracted dispute in the service nationally which revolved around modernisation, including the greater integration of retained fire-fighters in the service, and seems to have resulted in a major review of all practices and procedures (see Burchill 2004). Second, the village communities from which the retained service recruit are increasingly populated by commuters working long distances away. As one of the fire officers observed: "in the past we had people from local factories. These are becoming few and far between because everyone is cutting back." Many of the remaining local factories are in the food processing sector and increasingly employ migrants from the A8 states. Accordingly, the F&R has had to accommodate these changes in order to perform its fire safety role, for example, translating its literature into Polish and other languages. It also had to confront language issues in factory visits to give advice on fire safety; but such visits do provide an opportunity to recruit retained fire-fighters from the migrant workforce. At the time of the interviews this strategy had only led to the recruitment of two retained fire-fighters from the migrant community. The station officer indicated that on the basis of retained fire-fighting "you can earn yourself five or six hundred pounds a month in your hand" and the Polish retained fire-fighter interviewed, while in the process of moving to a full-time post, had this as his only paid occupation at the time of interview.

### 3. RECRUITMENT

Each of the three employers turned to migrant workers because of a lack of suitable applicants from the domestic labour market. All three had tried to encourage applications from potential candidates locally before the change in recruitment. FurnitureCo had originally recruited through promotions at the local Job Centre, but, as with the other cases, recruitment had also happened through more informal channels, largely word of mouth. Like the organisations employing migrant workers in the construction and hospitality sectors examined by McKay (2009), there was a sense of informality in their normal recruitment process. Word of mouth had also acted against FurnitureCo's capacity to recruit on the local labour market, the company having acquired a bad name as a result of changes made to pay and conditions and the production process. Furthermore, the flow of applicants making speculative approaches for employment had dried up. At the same time, and increasingly visible in the local labour market, potential workers were becoming available from the EU and particularly from the A8 states.

Employers wishing to recruit migrant labour have, in this context, two clear alternatives. Either they can recruit from a pool of available labour already within the local labour market or they can stage their recruitment in the country of origin of the potential migrant workers. Even here there is a further choice of either attempting to recruit directly, which would require some knowledge of labour markets in the targeted country, or utilising a recruitment company or agency with the required local intelligence and experience. F&R, extending their normal practice for retained fire-fighters, had little choice but to recruit migrant workers from the available local labour market. Two of their non-operational administrative workers, involved in preventative work in local industry, were native Polish speakers. Visiting local factories, increasingly staffed by migrant workers, the message of fire safety therefore became linked with attempts to recruit retained fire-fighters from the workforce. Attempting to recruit from the migrant workforce was a clear recognition of changes that had occurred in the local labour market. However, the transformation to dormitory towns and villages, together with the arrival of migrants to staff the remaining industry, meant this recruitment strategy was not without drawbacks. The essence of migrant labour is its transience, usually casual and mobile, which makes it unsuitable for the requirements of the fire and rescue service, which expects a commitment to protracted training lasting at least twelve months. Beyond this, the long hours often worked by migrants inhibited their commitment to being available for call out. The recruits needed to be more settled, as was the case with the migrant retained fire-fighter we interviewed. He had given up factory work to undertake child care while his partner had continued working in food processing, although this was about to change since he was about to take up a full time appointment in another fire and rescue service.

In contrast to F&R, BusCo and FurnitureCo sought to recruit directly from the A8 countries. In both cases there was not just a failure to recruit from the local labour market but also another failure in recruitment from another EU state before targeting workers from Eastern Europe. FurnitureCo first recruited workers from Portugal but, both managers claimed, they did not prove reliable employees. Management subsequently targeted Polish, Czech, and Slovakian workers. BusCo had been more systematic, having initially attempted to recruit in Malta, where they thought there were available drivers who were used to the

English language and to driving on the left, as well as being more amenable to the long hours of working. Jobs were advertised in Maltese newspapers and two managers were dispatched to carry out interviews. Special arrangements were made to accommodate these Maltese drivers in caravans at the bus depot. Although two of the Maltese drivers remained in the company at the time of the interviews, the HR manager reported a 'culture clash' and problems of discipline which had led them to redirect their recruitment efforts to Poland. BusCo first advertised and then sent two of their managers to Poland to recruit 40 to 50 drivers, but problems were identified with the process. The HR manager at BusCo explained:

*(The managers sent to Poland) interviewed ... 40 odd people and out of those ... they picked 26 and they spoke to all these 26 who were fluent in English. Then what happened was that we said on this date at this hotel, at this place, at this time, we will send a bus from the UK over to Poland – 50-seater bus – we will pick you all up, all your luggage, and take you back to England. That's what we did. We got them back to England and I would think about 14 of them didn't speak English. So I think what happened was that these 40 people were desperate. Some of them sent other people in their place to the interview.*

Drivers' lack of language skills was attributed to their desperation to get jobs in England, and all the Poles were employed.

One point of tension, beyond the long hours themselves, was that after the shift, drivers were also responsible for cleaning their own bus. Subsequently the company took on Polish mechanics and cleaners for the buses, relieving the drivers of this final chore at the end of their shifts. Drivers were still required to work long hours, but, as the HR manager explained, some of the tension seemed to have been alleviated:

*Our buses have never been so clean. We had a situation where we would have a guy doing 60, 80, 100, 110 hours and he'd come in and his duty was to stay behind after was to clean his vehicle, wash vehicle, fuel it up ... it would pee a lot of drivers off to be honest.*

Recruitment at FurnitureCo had tended historically to be through word of mouth but, because of their poor reputation as an employer, this source had dried up. Having normally approached the local job centre to fill vacancies, the company now used the European Employment Service through the job centre to advertise for Eastern European recruitment. Adverts were placed on the Service's website and applicants' CVs were passed to the company. Initial telephone screening interviews were held, in part to check candidates' English language skills. The interviews were also used to establish how long an applicant wanted to stay in the UK; this needed to be at least a year because of the time and cost involved in training. They also explored the prospective employee's 'attitude' to try to ascertain the likelihood of them 'turning up every day for work'. If the candidate proved acceptable in the telephone interview they were asked to attend for a face-to-face interview in the UK. While there was still no guarantee of a job the candidates arrived ready to stay in the UK if one was offered.

The company adopted this method of direct recruitment for two years, but recently decided to use a specialist agency instead, as they thought this would be less time consuming. The HR manager explained:



*For the first couple of years I recruited directly, which in a way is very satisfying because you check them all out and you do everything for them but its very time consuming. Now if we want to recruit we use an agency in London that actually source skilled upholsterers for us in Poland.*

Initially, this proved successful for the recruitment of a small number of workers. The company found that it minimised time taken in recruitment and filling precise skill requirements. More recently, however, managers claimed the use of an agency had become problematic. Immediately prior to being interviewed, there had been problems with eight workers recruited by the agency. According to the company they lacked the necessary experience and skills and also planned to stay for less than the stipulated twelve months. The HR manager reflected on the problems they encountered using an agency for recruitment:

*If you went to an agency in Poland and you said, 'right we want carpenters or people who are used to working in wood' and they put an advert out you'd get 100 applicants from people who've never seen wood in their lives, and 'can you speak English', 'some' well they can say good morning and that's it. And they turn up on your doorstep, some people who you've never seen before. And you might feel some pressure, because they've flown over ... But if you put an advert in the local paper you'd probably get the same sort of people coming through the door who've been here a year or so and can speak English, and you can talk to them and get a good impression from them. You can interview them and decide if you're going to take them or not.*

One concern at the time of the research was that there may now be a departure of migrants, even among those reasonably settled in the UK (see Economist 2008; Philips 2008). The financial advantages of migration were being eroded by rising wage potential at home, combined with poorer exchange rates. Recruiters, whilst recognising this shift, felt that the current migrant population had become settled in the community and that, if there was some movement, labour could be replaced locally. However, this replacement was expected to come from redundant workers within the migrant community. The much-publicised closure of a local food processing factory which had employed large numbers of migrant workers was expected to mean that there would be a healthy pool of recruits with language capability and experience of the UK, locally; rather than further recruitment having to be undertaken out in the migrants' countries of origin.

## 4. INTEGRATION OF MIGRANT WORKERS

The next consideration is integration of migrant workers into the work and wider communities, and the immediate measures taken by management upon the recruitment of migrant labour from abroad, in order to ameliorate any tensions with the existing workforce. This is particularly important because, given the circumstances of the recruitment linked to broader changes in working practices at both BusCo and FurnitureCo, the very recruitment of migrant workers may have been construed as a threat to the existing workforce. While there was no such threat in F&R, there were broader changes resulting from the service modernisation agenda following the industrial dispute but, perhaps more importantly, the service was making a concerted attempt at more sustained community engagement. One issue that was pointed to by one of the migrant workers interviewed, and has key significance for the integration of migrant workers, as it does for all aspects considered, is the aspirations that migrant workers themselves may have. Drawing on a suggestion by the Polish HR assistant interviewed, we might distinguish between two types of migrant workers. First are those migrants who have moved from home to earn as much money as possible, perhaps for a specific purpose, with the expectation of moving back home as quickly as possible. Second are those who have migrated essentially to leave home, with the expectation of staying away from home - perhaps with some brief return visits - on a permanent basis.

### 4.1 Integration into the workforce

At FurnitureCo, a senior manager reported that the workforce had been advised that "We're getting migrant workers, there is no way we are tolerating any discrimination. You get on with them like any other worker". His view was that it had been made very clear that "we wouldn't tolerate anything. ... We've not had any issues". One reason why there might have been some expectation of tension between the existing workforce and the migrant workers from Eastern Europe is the latter's reputation for 'hard work'. As a study of the employers of migrants produced for the Home Office noted, "employers of foreign nationals tended to appreciate this group's work ethic and reliability more than any specific skill sets that was brought to the job" (Dench *et al* 2006, p18). While in all cases the main reason for the recruitment of migrants was the shortage of labour, there was also a sense, at least in the case of private sector managers, of threat to the existing workforce from this perceived work ethic of the Eastern European migrants. As the HR manager from BusCo reflected:

*(We thought) this is going to cause problems amongst our English workforce because they were so good; the work ethic was so strong. Just incredible, you couldn't praise them more fully. But it didn't - it had the opposite effect.*

While the tensions within the workforce anticipated by these managers did not materialise, there had also been anticipation of tension from the Eastern European migrants themselves, who saw that they might pose a general threat to the security of existing employees in the UK. As one of the migrant workers interviewed put it:

*When we started they were scared of us as well because they didn't know what they can say or what they can do. But it wasn't really a big problem. Not for me, maybe for other guys ... I understand English people. When five*

*hundred thousand people come to their country and take their jobs then I understand it.*

Although relations between the migrant and existing workforces proved far more harmonious than expected, there were nevertheless some tensions. The HR manager at FurnitureCo related one such issue:

*We've got a rest room where people bring their sandwiches. And the UK workers tend to bring their sandwiches made up. Slovaks were bringing loaves of bread and knives to cut it; they were like machetes. We had someone say they feel a bit apprehensive so we had words with them.*

Such incidents were attributed to cultural differences by the manager. Incidents which may have been seen as misconduct in the case of existing workers were dealt with with a degree of tolerance, not just because of the perceived hard work and positive attitude of the migrant workers, but also because of the effect on the existing, native, workforce:

*What it did ... these drivers, we've got the core 60 drivers maybe who really shouldn't be bus drivers, unemployable elsewhere, their behaviour and attitude were dreadful ... The Poles, what that did to some of these people was 'if I don't wear my uniform or if I don't look smart, if I don't turn in on time, 'I'm going to lose my job.' So it's created what I would call healthy competition, I really do believe that.*

This does not mean that migrants exclusively displayed exemplary behaviour; managers from each of the three case study organisations gave examples to the contrary. Some migrants clearly did misbehave, and this usually involved alcohol. At BusCo two drivers were caught stealing diesel and, although disciplined and dismissed, were advised to appeal and were given their jobs back. The incident was attributed by the HR manager to taking diesel as being seen as a 'perk of the job' in Poland. There were cases cited by the HR manager of his going to court to give support to drivers prosecuted for particular offences, usually alcohol related:

*One Pole got arrested for refusing a breathalyser and I advised him his best defence was he didn't understand a word of English, he didn't know what they asked him for. He got off with it. (We) saved a bus driver.*

Even in F&R there had been problems with one migrant worker, again involving alcohol and concerning drinking while on-call. However, again, the manager concerned put it down to cultural differences, his rationale being that "in Poland drink-driving regulations are far more lax".

There was a sense among some of the managers interviewed that the work ethic of the Eastern European workforce would somehow transfer to the established local workforce. This gave the impression of a management 'celebration of the stereotype of the good worker', as recognised by Mackenzie & Forde (2009) in their case study of Glassfix. Nevertheless, there was also clear evidence that migrants were hard working. The Polish HR officer at BusCo reported that she was holding down another job at weekends, in addition to also studying for a degree in Human Resource Management. However, while the migrant interviewees recognised this, the reason given was that such a work ethic had been inculcated in their home countries by the lack of labour market protection, and that if they did not appear to be working hard they would lose their jobs.

## 4.2 Integration into the community

All three migrant workers interviewed reported minor incidents of prejudice in the local community, for example being ignored in a local shop or shouted at from a passing car, but none of them considered these significant or important. The HR manager at BusCo did stress that, while there was no evidence of conflict within the workplace, there were tensions on some of the bus routes; drivers were subject to abuse from passengers, particularly on school runs. The migrants interviewed felt that in the main they had been welcomed into the community and that many things seemed to have changed to accommodate them. Commenting that "I don't feel away from home", one migrant worker pointed to a range of services and products – such as cheap flights, cheap telephone calls and supermarkets stocking Polish foods – introduced since her arrival only three years previously.

For Fire & Rescue, there was a need to both reflect and engage with the local community. It was suggested that this very engagement could play a part in changing that community:

*What we are encouraged to do is have a workforce which reflects the local population. So ... we will recruit more migrant workers. It will encourage people to accept them more into the local community. (F&R HR Manager)*

We might have some reservations about drawing strong conclusions from the interviews with migrant workers. The three migrant interviewees were possibly not typical, chosen by management and therefore perhaps more accommodated to the host community (each of them claimed that they did not generally socialise within the migrant community). One of the migrant worker interviewees explained:

*You've got two paths, and I think most Polish people choose the easy path. Which means that they come to this country (for the) money, they don't like to settle in the UK. (They're) still in a Polish community, just Polish family, friends, and everyone when they speak Polish language. Because when you work in a factory for example you don't have to use English. They don't like the UK, the weather, the food, they like earning money.*

She and the other two migrant workers interviewed seemed to have followed the alternative 'path' of increasing integration into UK communities. This was most pronounced in the case of the retained fire-fighter who was taking up a full-time appointment at a different service involving another move with his wife and child, this time to Scotland. However, he felt that this relocation would be easier since:

*I now know the basic things like to find a place to live, find a job, how to send a child to school, how to get a national insurance number, go to the doctors, all that stuff because when you come here you don't know anything.*

This fire-fighter had started work in a food processing factory, where his wife still worked, and from there had become a retained fire-fighter. Subsequently he had given up working in the factory to look after his young daughter. The retained fire-fighting role was therefore his only paid employment. Two of the migrants contrasted their position, working and speaking predominantly English, with those of partners who worked with other Eastern Europeans. One ventured that his

wife's command of English was now worse than when they had arrived since she communicated exclusively with fellow migrants from A8 countries.

## 5. EMPLOYER ASSISTANCE

Perhaps the defining feature in the employment of migrant workers is that in moving away from their homes they are also likely moving away from a range of support available through social networks of friends and family in their own countries. Their means of achieving some of the more basic needs may also be lost in cultural or bureaucratic differences, and a lack of knowledge of how to navigate an alien system. Assistance is therefore often required from the new employer, the migrant community, or other sources. The provision of accommodation for migrants has particularly formed the basis of many of the accounts about the abuse and exploitation of migrant workers forced to take overcrowded and substandard housing at an exorbitant rent (Shelter 2008). This has been represented in fiction in Marina Lewyka's (2006) *Two Caravans* based around the misadventures of migrant workers in their work and housing. Our case study organisations all wanted to be seen as good employers and were well aware of these stories of poor housing, as the HR manager at BusCo put it:

*A lot of employers abused it. They've got them over here, packed them in a filthy caravan with no gas bottle. I have heard terrible stories. Paying them a pittance then sacking them after they've done a bit of work for no reason. I was determined as HR manager I would not allow that type of abuse.*

Of the two case study employers who directly recruited migrant workers, there were considerable differences in what their managers thought they would have to do to support their new employees. In one case considerable preparation had been made for the arrival of migrant workers, including their transportation to the UK, while at the other there had been an initial intent to deal with migrant workers no differently to any other employee, and therefore a disinclination to become concerned with their housing and broader welfare.

In their recruitment of workers from Malta, BusCo had made extensive plans for the requirements of migrants taken away from home and family. Special housing arrangements were made for their accommodation in well equipped and comfortable caravans on the site of the bus depot. The company also introduced special holiday arrangements. All drivers were entitled to fifteen days paid leave plus statutory bank holidays. However, because the company recognised that drivers away from home may become homesick, or have to deal with family emergencies, workers from Malta were additionally offered the possibility of six extra weeks of unpaid leave, which could be taken in one or two week blocks. Described as a 'good retention factor' by the HR manager, this arrangement was also kept in place for the Polish workers who are also offered extra leave entitlement on the same terms. For FurnitureCo, the HR manager said their anticipation of the assistance that would be needed was very different to the reality. She observed:

*We thought we would bring these people in. We wouldn't need to help them. They'd come, work, that's it. But in reality ... the amount of stuff we had to do for them. But they all appreciated it and welcomed the help we gave them. But I hadn't thought how much time I'd have to give to it. So when we next did an ad on the Euro web site I knew what I was letting myself in for.*

The assistance offered to migrant workers proved very wide, with blurred boundaries between what was required for them to fulfil their employment role

and broader help with their relocation. Both FurnitureCo and BusCo told of having arranged driving licences, work permits, national insurance registration, as well as for dentists and GPs for some of their new employees. There was also reported assistance given with purchasing furniture for new accommodation and, in one case, a bicycle. The employers demonstrated what might be characterised as a maternal (or paternal) attitude to the migrant workers, described as a “a lot of mothering when they first arrived. ... Anything they weren’t sure about they’d come to see me and I’d be ringing up. ... It was very time consuming.” (HR Manager, FurnitureCo)

## 5.1 Housing

The HR manager at FurnitureCo was not prepared for the amount of help she was required to give the migrant workers to meet their broad welfare needs. Whilst this support had not been seen as part of the normal responsibility of an employer, it seemed as if a moral commitment to these new members of the workforce had developed. As she explained:

*When we first brought (the migrant workers) over in 2004 obviously I had to find them housing. No - that’s not quite right. I didn’t have to find them housing because it’s their responsibility. We said when they came they weren’t getting any help from me in relocation or anything. In practice, I couldn’t let them do it all on their own.*

The worker from FurnitureCo explained how, when he and his colleagues arrived for interview, they had rented a caravan hoping that they would get the job, or another one, quickly. They had brought £200 between them. This appeared reasonably typical, with arrangements for housing rather piecemeal and haphazard. It was pointed out that housing was in short supply because it was essentially a rural area. Faced with such ad hoc arrangements, management gave assistance with housing, finding accommodation through contacts, renting a house and subletting it to another group of their migrant workers, sorting inventories and other arrangements:

*So, in practice, while we said we weren’t helping them in the end we did a lot.* (FurnitureCo, HR manager)

The HR manager at BusCo was more prepared for the amount of effort that was required to help settle migrants. In initially recruiting the Maltese drivers, arrangements were made for temporary accommodation in two mobile homes on site. Later, when drivers were recruited from Poland, an empty ex-convent was taken over by the company and bedrooms let out to all 26 drivers at a cheap rent. Arrangements were also made for a special introduction to local facilities, for example supermarkets, and to aspects of the migrant community such as the Polish church and club; thus, according to the HR manager, the Polish drivers “created their own community”. While the two organisations provided accommodation, or assisted workers with getting it, managers were keen to and stress the quality of the housing that had been made available.

## 5.2 Language

Employers interviewed for research for the Home Office saw “language barriers (as) the only disadvantage to employing migrants” (Dench *et al* 2006, p.vi). As we have already seen, all three employers in our case study organisations were concerned with potential employees’ capacity in the English language at the point

of recruitment. Selection of individual workers for interview had deliberately centred on migrants with stronger command of the English language, although this had not always been successful. In the case of FurnitureCo and BusCo, who engaged in direct recruitment of employees from accession states, managers attempted to filter out those candidates with inadequate language skills before migration, although this was not always successful. F&R, attempting to recruit both retained fire-fighters and auxiliary staff, assessed the language skills of those migrant workers already in employment in the UK. Because of the limitations of the selection process, the need for a specialist language, or just to enhance general competence, each employer had concerns with language training. In some circumstances, especially where this might have implications for health and safety within the workplace, there was also consideration of translation of documentation.

At BusCo accommodation was made for bus drivers whose English language skills were limited. While the company ran buses on national routes, some of the work, like a contract for local schools, followed a relatively short and regular route. Rather than being scheduled for the irregular and varied contracts, these drivers with limited English were put on the most routine and regular routes which could easily be learnt and offered little variation. They might also require little communication with the passengers. However this could still pose problems when there was a break in the routine and the driver had problems communicating. The HR manager at BusCo recounted one such incident:

*A police officer rang me, and he says he'd arrested one of our Polish drivers for abduction. I said "Abduction, what you on about?" What happened was the bus driver, we knew he couldn't speak English, so he went from up there round there, up there every day and then one day behold we had a detour. He went on detour, got lost, (and) panicked. (He) saw a man stood on the side and beckoned him onto the bus, closed the bus doors and wouldn't let him off and (wanted) help to get back to -- -- Road which was about 4 miles away from where this guy wanted to be. This guy then rung the police and said he been abducted by a Polish bus driver.*

While there could be problems of communication in the wider community, managers' main concerns were with communication with fellow workers. As with employers interviewed in the Home Office study (Dench *et al* 2006 p 39), this was considered of particular importance when it involved health and safety. The officers at F&R were concerned with any recruits' ability to communicate with fellow fire-fighters; "you have to know if you are giving someone a command that they understand it fully" (F&R station manager). Failure to understand could be a matter of survival for all involved. At FurnitureCo managers were particularly concerned with workers' use of nail-guns which had been the cause of the high accident rate in the past. According to the Production Manager "it's extremely difficult if they don't understand English well enough. We have been extremely lucky." However, while there was recognition of this need, unlike the hospitality and construction companies in McKay's study (2009) no formal arrangements were made to organise language capacity within the arrangements of the work organisation.

Subsequent to recruitment, employers saw two possible measures they could actually implement, rather than risking luck in the language capacity of their migrant workforce; provision of translation and language training. While the possibility of formal translation into the languages of migrant workers was



considered by all three managements, each rejected it. The HR Manager from FurnitureCo explained that:

*We looked at that but then we were told not to because, they said, then the Welsh, the Scottish, could all say you're discriminating against us. If you do it for one of them then you've got to do it literally for everyone.*

FurnitureCo's induction program used slides with illustrations to highlight health and safety messages, with a follow-up questionnaire to check that this has been understood. Translators were however used on occasion when it was considered necessary. In F&R additional support such as the use of mentors was given during training. Many of the safety materials used in F&R's fire prevention programmes had been translated into the main languages of migrants; targeted at local workplaces where large numbers of migrants were employed. One task for F&R's two Polish administrative workers was to work as community safety advocates, communicating fire safety messages to migrant workers in factories in the region. This contact was used to attempt to recruit migrant workers, or at least those expecting to remain locally, as retained fire-fighters.

BusCo had also recruited a part-time Polish HR assistant. Her initial contact with the company had been to act informally as a translator for a bus driver during a disciplinary hearing and, since appointment, she has continued to act as an informal translator, as she explained:

*(Workers) come with problems like translation ... Problem with the car insurance company or one of the drivers had an accident a few months ago and he's got letters from the solicitors. I can always advise, of course and using the fact that I can speak both languages. ... It is just help you give your employees. If I can delay it, and it takes me five minutes to do something of course then I'll do it. I remember the time when I was on my own and didn't speak English.*

While the HR manager presented this part of the assistant's work as central, it was seen as far more informal and peripheral by the assistant, who saw her main role as establishing formal HR procedures that BusCo lacked.

All three employers had explored means of language training, although these were also, so far, informal arrangements. Enquiries were made with local further education colleges, although actual classes appear short-lived. Advice about lessons was now provided by FurnitureCo's HR manager "pointing them in the right direction", with BusCo finding some of their drivers reluctant to learn. Managers at FurnitureCo did themselves take a few Polish lessons to improve communication with the workforce, "trying to make them welcome and learn a few words" rather than giving any real capacity in the language.

The most elaborate plans were posed by F&R, who at least speculated about the possibility of using the fire station for English language classes for anyone in the community who wanted them, alongside recruits:

*It's a good local facility. You've got projectors, you've got whiteboards, you've got other facilities here. Got tea making. It lent itself to do that. It stood here for a lot of the time as an RDF station and 90% of the time it's not being used. And yet it is heated and it's lit so it makes perfect sense to actually say 'let's do something for the local community'. The payback would be we actually get more fire-fighters. And even if it's the indigenous*

*population who want to learn to read and write there are things we can do, positive action to encourage people to come on board.*

However, at the time of the interviews, ideas for this venture were largely speculative.

## 6. SOME REFLECTIONS

At the outset this research had three objectives, to explore:

- a) Workplace issues arising from the employment of migrant labour, not only from the perspective of employers but also those of migrant employees;
- b) The extent to which employers have developed/adapted their HR policies and practices to address issues associated with the employment of migrant labour, and;
- c) The factors that hinder or support them in meeting the needs of migrant workers and in integrating them into their existent workforce.

To this end we took three cases where migrant workers were employed as a preliminary investigation into the practices associated with their employment. In the selection of these cases we sought organisations which had made conscious efforts to integrate migrant workers into an established workforce. Given their well-known reputation for having to endure poor working conditions, we also had some inclination to explore relatively *good* conditions being offered to migrant workers. While this may have been rather ambitious for our modest resources we have found that the integration of migrant workers in these three organisations has been without noticeable tension. In these final reflections we return to explore the changes which have been identified and some areas that have been brought to light in the consideration of the management of migrant workers.

Perhaps the most important changes for these organisations were those which created the context for the recruitment of migrant workers, rather than those changes which arose from it. In the case of FurnitureCo, the changes in production, and particularly the changes in the payment system and working hours, led to local recruitment problems. Although directly unrelated to the recruitment of migrant workers, these factors clearly shaped the company's move in recruitment strategy. In both the other cases there appear to have been less transparent changes that also produced conditions which made recruitment more difficult; but this is complex and outside the scope of this study. In the case of BusCo this probably dated back to deregulation of bus services<sup>6</sup> where competition created pressures on drivers' pay and conditions. Changes underpinning the shifting recruitment strategy at F&R are perhaps even less tangible, being rooted in the long-term changes in English rural communities.

With such changes underway, in each case management turned to a strategy of recruiting migrant workers in a bid to ameliorate problems created by changes that were already established. In the case of F&R, the move was part of a broader attempt to be more representative of the communities in which they operated and were dependent for drawing recruits from. The two organisations which initiated direct recruitment from A8 states did so with very different preconceptions about what changes they were required to make. BusCo had initiated a range of changes to anticipate the welfare needs of migrant workers, arranging accommodation and an introduction into the local community. Managers at FurnitureCo, in contrast, had initially anticipated taking no specific or special measures for migrant workers they recruited, largely for fear that doing so would be construed as favouritism, especially by their established workforce. In

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<sup>6</sup> Transport Act 1985 introduced deregulation of bus services allowing competition on routes.

practice, they moved towards a range of informal support for these workers - as with BusCo – arranging for registration with doctors and dentists, and also giving some assistance with loans for essentials like housing and transport. Informality of procedure and a paternalistic management style entailed management involvement in a range of activities to promote the welfare of these migrant workers – including support in minor travails with the legal system.

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