



Effective integration and the EU burden

Nick Johnson*

The changing nature of migration in and amongst member states highlights the need for the EU to support national and local government in fostering better integration and community cohesion

Immigration is an area of public policy where the centre left has consistently been failing in recent years. And that failure is both a policy and political one. In terms of the latter, despite increasingly draconian language and talk of clampdowns and new restrictions, public confidence in immigration controls remains low and attitudes towards migration are increasingly negative.

This creates a negative spiral intensified by repeated failures to tackle the practical implications of migration. Knowledge of population movement is still poor and too reliant upon fixed datasets, which seem anachronistic in an age of high mobility, and funding formulas are too inflexible to cope with annual changes, let alone seasonal migration patterns.

Practical considerations create real issues at the local level – insufficient public service provision, lack of proper integration advice for newcomers, competition for ever more scarce resources – and exacerbate tensions.

One response has been to demand greater autonomy at the local level to facilitate integration. Certainly this has merit on two fundamental levels. Firstly, as a new Policy Network paper by Rinus Penninx makes clear, any meaningful interaction between new migrants and the host society will take place within neighbourhoods and it is this kind of interaction that will help to overcome prejudices and foster real integration. Secondly, it is local service providers who will be best equipped to provide information and advice to newcomers to aid the integration process.

* The author writes here in a personal capacity

However, too much devolution of the integration process risks ignoring some of the major factors that will determine whether integration occurs or not. No matter how responsive and engaged local providers might be, if they are forced to operate in an environment that is consistently negative about migration and sustains general public hostility, the impact of their efforts will be limited. Instead of dedicating their energy to the promotion of the integration process, they will have to spend valuable time and resources countering myths and assumptions that, while having no basis in reality, are created in the national sphere and resonate within local communities.

Too much reliance on localities also strikes me as symptomatic of an old-fashioned approach to migration issues. Most national migration and integration approaches are rooted in the idea that people make a once-in-a-lifetime decision to uproot their family and relocate. Having done this, they settle in an area and make their home there. Thus both the host community and the new individual or family have a mutual obligation to make the new arrangement work. While this type of migration still happens, it is becoming rarer, with a growing number of migrants moving two, three or even more times. Furthermore, for EU citizens, the rules and requirements set-out for integration in a particular member state are less important as their European citizenship enables them to move freely and settle without conditionality.

Thus we have a paradox. Policy and practice emphasise numerical restrictions and an increasing conformity on the part of new migrants while at the same time these instruments are inapplicable to the migrants that have caused much of the recent concern, both real and imagined.

There can be no disputing that the free movement of people within the EU causes some significant problems for service providers and poses challenges to cohesion in some communities. This is not to oppose such movement but merely to state that unless and until we solve some of these issues, we risk undermining the arguments for migration.

Research clearly shows that mobility has cost implications for service providers – whether this is in terms of housing supply, health provision or changing school rolls. One major problem is that the free movement of people means that authorities simply do not know who is where and what their needs are. Undoubtedly, the people who need to know this are primarily those at the local level where delivery of services takes place, yet there is also a pressing need for population mobility to be monitored much more effectively at the national or EU level. Furthermore, while knowing where people are is a key starting point in solving this problem, funding it properly must come next. Migration has economic benefits, yet too often such benefits are not going to those who bear the burden of supplying the necessary services.

A stronger role for the EU in monitoring movement should go hand in hand with greater involvement in language provision. In the UK we have recently seen debates over ESOL provision and its costs. This debate has been fuelled by the need to draw a distinction between those who will be settling within a community and those whose presence is merely transitory. It is widely accepted that language is crucial not only to longer-term integration but also to short-term

success – understanding what services are available and avoiding exploitation in the workplace are just two examples. Not only should some consideration be given to the role the EU can play in promoting multilingualism across its member states, but the EU should also support individual nation states in funding language provision.

The most effective forms of integration can take place at the local level; however, such integration cannot happen if new migrants are ill prepared for integration and prone to poor socio-economic status. In the past, preventing this was clearly the exclusive role of national governments. Yet, the changing nature of migration and, in particular, the freedom of movement across the EU, has made it more difficult for states to influence this process on their own. Furthermore, many of these issues have been generated at the EU level. The free movement of labour is undoubtedly the right policy but its implications have not been properly mapped and certainly not properly prepared for.

It is all very well to emphasise the need for decentralisation as Penninx does, but we cannot ignore the fact that if the EU is to make free movement work, it has an obligation to put in place the practical and financial means to enable this to occur. Without this, the burden is passed down to individual countries and local service providers and migration increasingly breeds resentment and tension within local communities. The EU has a role, and indeed an obligation, to put in place better provisions to support national and local government achieve successful integration.

Nick Johnson is director of policy at the Institute of Community Cohesion