# INTEGRATION: THE PUBLIC'S VIEW

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#### **Aims**

We explore people's understandings of integration based on the findings from a series of focus groups that we conducted with members of the public, both migrant and UK-born from ethnic minority and majority groups, in Manchester and Glasgow. During the focus groups, we enabled participants to discuss what they thought integration is; what it involves; how it can be achieved; the main barriers to it; and who should be responsible for it.

## The meaning of integration

The word cloud in Figure 1 represents the 30 most common words used when respondents were asked to express their immediate, instinctive thoughts about the word 'integration' during an initial brainstorming session.

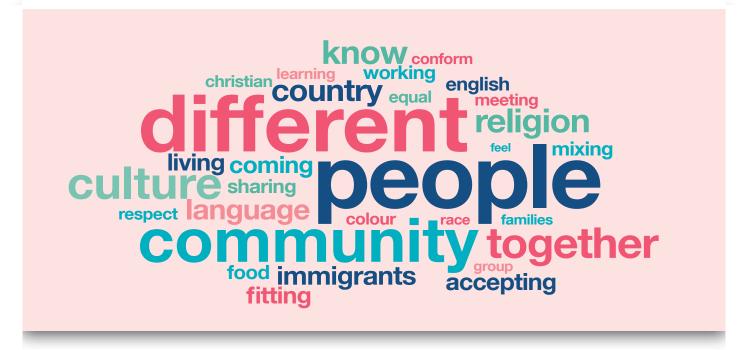
Despite only presenting a partial (and somehow superficial) snapshot of what developed into a much more complex discussion during the focus groups, the word cloud provides some interesting insights into the participants' perceptions of integration. The latter seems to be generally linked to the concept of difference and diversity (with some cultural aspects

clearly emerging, e.g. religion and language), cohesion and unity (together, mixing, sharing), but also of something that relates to both communities and individuals.

When further prompted to explore the term in more detail, many aspects of integration were emphasised by respondents. Language was often seen as a crucial component that was linked to the ability to communicate and seen as an important point of entry for further mixing and exchanges between people. The idea of mutual embracing and respecting of diversity was also seen as important, as well as the need to mix socially with all strata of society. These aspects would ensure that everyone could take part in the community and feel included. Integration as a harmonious mixing of different cultures based on reciprocal respect was perceived as a desirable goal, an ideal outcome and a process where everyone in society plays a crucial role. Nonetheless, the group discussion also led to reflecting on how these ideas appear more difficult to achieve in practice.

Whereas many of the aspects discussed emphasised a twoway process, there were aspects of integration where the onus was considered to be mostly upon migrants such as: following established rules and knowledge and acceptance of local customs. These issues, and other issues linked to identity

Figure 1. Word cloud: first thoughts on meaning of integration













## **DIMENSIONS OF INTEGRATION IN POLICY DISCOURSES**

and cultural integration, emphasised an important tension between conformity to local culture and customs and the maintenance of one's own culture that respondents discussed as problematic and challenging.

## What does not help integration

The realisation of integration as defined above, however, is made difficult by barriers and challenges that were identified (inductively) and discussed by participants. These (or at least the main ones) are highlighted in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Main barriers to integration



Some barriers were mentioned by all groups of respondents (pink circles). These included lack of language knowledge (which hinders one's ability to interact and settle); issues of intolerance and prejudice (from the receiving society) often fuelled by the negative national political and media discourse about immigration; as well as divisions between communities due to cultural differences, with religion in particularly being highlighted as a possible limit to social mixing. Some barriers were mostly emphasised by more 'established' ethnic minorities (blue squares), including issues of racism and discrimination as well as exclusion and inequalities based on social class and poverty (beyond ethnicity and migration). For these groups, it is also important to note the discontent expressed with the fact that 2nd+ generation migrants still feel the 'pressure' of having to integrate despite being born in the country. Finally, one main barrier that was mentioned mainly by those without an experience of migration (green), relate to the perception of being 'left behind' and not feeling free to express their own cultural identity (British/Scottish) or

their concerns and fears over lack of economic resources and immigration.

## What could help?

When discussing facilitators of integration, the focus seemed to be very much on the social elements highlighted above, i.e. mixing, diversity, and tolerance. Therefore, participants suggested that creating common, neutral spaces where people from different (ethnic, national, cultural, religious) backgrounds can come together, interact and socialise (e.g. schools, sport events, shared celebrations and public events) could help social mixing but also strengthen awareness and acceptance of diversity. Participants with a direct experience of migration also highlighted the importance of supporting the process of integration through advice and help, e.g. with learning the language and generally knowing more about how the 'system works'.

## Integration between ideals and reality

Integration seems to be perceived by the public as a societal goal that should be based on mutual acceptance of cultural diversity, tolerance and harmonious social mixing where all individuals are able to express themselves and thrive. However, this ideal appears to be a difficult goal to achieve in practice with boundaries between diversity and conformity, acceptance and rejection hard to establish and manage. Issues of socioeconomic exclusion and inequalities, racism and discrimination, cultural barriers, negative political stances on immigration and, more simply, the struggles of 'everyday life' challenge the ideal goal of integration. This tension between 'ideal' and 'reality' where social mixing is desirable but not sufficient should not be ignored when discussing integration.

#### The data

The data in this brief comes from 9 focus groups conducted with members of the public in Manchester (Nov 2014 - Sept 2015) and 6 focus groups conducted in Glasgow (June 2015-September 2015). Approximately 108 participants aged 16+ with direct, indirect, and no experience of migration participated in the focus groups, which therefore involved a broad group of first generation migrants, settled ethnic minorities and the White British/Scottish ethnic majority. The size of the groups ranged between 3 and 12 participants. The recruitment of research participants was facilitated by local community groups and activists.<sup>1</sup>

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