Westminster’s hidden population
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This report summarises the research commissioned by Westminster City Council into current population measures. Three research companies (LG Futures, SQW and ESRO) were commissioned to carry out this work and their executive summaries are included later in this report. The full reports have also been published.

The key findings across all the research are:

- Thousands of migrants are not being counted within Westminster’s boundaries. Independent research has found that Westminster has over 13,000 illegal migrants within its boundary at any one time and that around 11,000 short-term migrants annually are ‘hidden’ as they are not registered in official statistics.

- Ground breaking research using ethnographic techniques conducted by ESRO suggests that some migrant communities in Westminster may be twice as likely to register for bank accounts and mobile phones than with state institutions such as with a GP or for National Insurance numbers.

- Westminster is the number one destination for working migrants accepted through the Worker Registration scheme - over 16,000 have registered in Westminster between May 2004 to March 2007.

- The current methods used to estimate migration are not fit for purpose. Research case studies show, that the current one size fits all measurement, assumptions of migrant behaviour and government policy is failing to address the needs of local communities.

- The ESRO research also found that the Office of National Statistics’ definition of a ‘household’ does not accurately reflect the complex living arrangements of migrants in the twenty first century.

- Research conducted by SQW and Local Government Futures shows that official estimates are not ‘fit for purpose’ in areas as
diverse as Westminster. The council says this is backed up by the fact that the Office for National Statistics, responsible for compiling population estimates, refused to include Westminster in a test of the forthcoming 2011 census that was undertaken in May 2007. The ONS said: "our methods might be sufficiently good enough for more typical cities".

- Local Government Futures found: "We have found no evidence to suggest that the combination of the City of Westminster’s extreme characteristics have been considered, or addressed, by the current or proposed ONS methodologies for calculating mid year population estimates between 2002 and 2005."

**Key characteristics of migrants in Westminster:**

- Westminster is an attractive place for migrants to work and live as they can avoid London’s travel costs. A number live in crowded accommodation (5-8 per room) and do so because of economic choice rather than necessity. Polish ‘migrants’ call this phenomenon ‘teams’ and will behave like families or fraternities.

- They are mainly employed in the service sector.

- They do not all move immediately out of London as assumed by Ministers and should be called ‘mid-term’ migrants, staying between 3 and 12 months at a time.

- ‘Speculative migration’. A number of migrants come to Westminster on a ‘holiday’ or for a ‘visit’ but actually use the time to look for jobs and plan future permanent stays. They behaved more like residents despite sometimes staying for only a few months if no permanent opportunities were found.

- Language and other barriers were overcome through the use of a ‘node’ or person who may organise work, accommodation, bills and even register them for national insurance. They may be the landlord, hostel manager or employer and will have existing links within a specific community.

- Some migrants fear being identified by authorities, for many different reasons. These migrants often share spaces with other migrants of a similar cultural background.
Research for this project was carried out with four migrant groups broadly categorised as: Chinese, Australian, Arab and Polish.

**Polish**
- There is evidence of an increasing number of Polish people in Westminster. For example, one Polish priest reported that this year there had been enough demand for him to hold a ceremony in Polish to bless food as part of the Easter celebrations.
- A large number of Polish migrants are students in Poland and come for summer ‘working’ holidays in order to earn and save money to finance studies back home. Many will return in subsequent years often with the aspiration to stay for longer.

**Arab**
- Arab asylum seekers start off with a legal status and register for council services but become invisible if they decide to stay after their cases are rejected.
- Arab refugees and asylum seekers choose to return to Westminster from northern cities thus breaking dispersal policies and becoming invisible.

**Chinese**
- Language barriers are near total for many in the Chinese community. This can lead to a total lack of participation in any kinds of state institution (even for residents of many years).
- Language barriers and cultural norms both contribute to a system in which people will entrust the payment of bills and any registrations to a friend, landlord or employer without any questions.
- A certain insularity to the Chinese community caused by language and cultural barriers means that much will be kept hidden from the views of ‘outsiders’/‘foreigners’ (the term persists even for these people living away from China).

**Australian**
- The ‘community’ infrastructure for Australian migrants in Westminster revolves mainly around nightlife though a growing number of hostels attest to a lively market for accommodation for Australians in and around Westminster.
- Sharing of accommodation to keep rents low is very common with the number of people sleeping in one room being very high. ‘Temporary accommodation’ often becomes long term stays. Even hostels have semi-permanent residents who have been there for as long as a year. There is a desire for more of this type of accommodation in Westminster.
This research builds on the previously compiled findings from the council:

- The Home Office used a report that suggested just 5-13,000 migrants would arrive in the UK on the accession of EU A8 countries. The Home Office paper, coordinated by the University College London economist Christian Dustmann, said: “Estimates for the UK range between 5,000 and 13,000 net immigrants a year.” Guardian 2 Sep 2006.

- The Home Office says its best estimate of illegal immigration is 430,000 but the number could be between 310,000 and 570,000. Immigration Minister Tony McNulty said the figures were a “best guess”. “By its very nature, it is impossible to quantify accurately, and that remains the case,” he said. BBC Online 30th June 2006.

- Migration figures released by the ONS earlier this month [April] suggested that approximately 56,000 Poles entered the UK in 2005, although the Department for Work and Pensions has issued figures suggesting that over 170,000 Polish citizens applied for National Insurance numbers in the same year. Observer 29 April 2007.

The council assesses the impact of these findings as:

- A risk to services caused by the government’s inability to measure population movement. Councils receive money from the government based largely on the amount of people in the area. Government figures published in April 2007 reduced the population growth due to migration by 60,000 in London and 15,500 in Westminster alone. The council warns that this risks undermining crucial services that councils provide.

- Westminster City Council believes that they will be lose up to £18 million in funding per year because the government is not properly counting population.

- The potential loss of £18 million per year would be the equivalent of an £150 increase on top of the average band D council tax bill in Westminster. However, last year the Council gave a commitment given to residents that they would not increase council tax by more than two per cent per annum until 2009/10, subject to the need to maintain financial prudence. The alternative would be facing difficult decisions in relation to social care services where there is a major threat to our future funding.

- The council says the mismanagement of migration will affect services as three-year funding for councils at the end of this year will lock them into settlements that disregard these ‘hidden’ communities.

- The council says that “the Government prefers to ignore these people, as they are too difficult for them to measure, rather than fund services to support them.”
The council calls on the following key actions from the government:

- Urgent action to stop ignoring hidden migrants
- To adequately fund alternative approaches to measuring population

Councillor Colin Barrow, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance at Westminster City Council, said:

"The government has repeatedly said that official estimates of migration are improving the quality of population numbers. This research calls this heroic assumption into question. Official statistics do not take account of migrants who say they are coming to the UK for less than 12 months. Places like Westminster attract huge amounts of this ‘short term’ migration.

“We are now calling for the Government to hold its hands up, admit they have simply lost count, and act quickly to sort this mess out. At present the Government prefers to ignore these people, as they are too difficult for them to measure, rather than fund services to support them.

“They can do this with immediate effect by putting a halt on the use of this discredited new method of counting population for the three year grant settlements.

“The government’s assumptions about migration in the UK are just plain wrong. We have been told by Ministers that migrants simply turn up in Westminster and then immediately go somewhere else. Although there is no doubt some do, our research suggests that this is too simple an assumption to make when determining how much money councils need to provide services.

“Last week, the Chief Executive of the Border and Immigration Agency said that no government can count the number of illegal entries into the country. Our researchers spoke to those people that the Office for National Statistics and the Government claims don’t exist and can’t count.

“This is not about migration costing the council money. There are many benefits to hard working migrants living and working in our city. It is about the inability of official statistics to keep up with the pace of change that means a rising number of councils are not receiving the funding they need."

Whilst the government of reaping the benefits of income tax increases from significant migration it appears to ignore the concerns of local councils who are shouldering the burden of making migration work.
The council is seeking reassurance from the government that it will make available specific grants to council areas with significant short-term migration until official statistics can improve. It is also calling on the government to adequately fund the Office for National Statistics that is currently losing staff due to budget pressures in order to find a robust and quick solution to migration measurement.

Figures:

- Westminster is the number one destination for working migrants accepted through the Workers Registration scheme- over 16,000 have registered in Westminster between May 2004 to March 2007.
- Over 34,000 residents of Westminster received a New National Insurance Number between 2002-2006 – equivalent to 17% of our 2001 census population.
- Westminster’s 2006 Housing Needs survey has identified increasing overcrowding and household sizes linked in significant part to a growth in housing of multiple occupation. This is adding further to the acute pressures on affordable housing in the City where 44% of children already live in overcrowded accommodation.
- Around half the rough sleepers in central London are now A8 migrants (Council survey December 2006).
- A recent survey for the Local Government Association, estimated that the cost to local authorities of supporting people with no recourse to public funds was an average of £818 thousand per local authority in 2006/07. Westminster City Council alone incurred over £1m in 2006/07.

Assumptions made by government ministers:

- “That these figures are lower than previous estimates [revised population estimates] simply reflects the reality that many migrants to the UK who arrive in London quickly move on (including many of those you indicate as arriving through Victoria Coach station).”
  *Letter from John Healey, Treasury Minister to Sir Simon Milton.*
- “The improvements that the ONS is making to its methodology makes the information more accurate and improves quality.”
  *Angela Eagle, Treasury Minister.*
- “No government can enumerate the number of clandestine entries into a country. We have to honest about that.”
  *Lin Homer, Chief Executive,*
  *Border and Immigration Agency, Public Finance 31st August 2007.*
Quotes:

The ONS say: “There is now a broad recognition that available estimates of migrant numbers are inadequate for managing the economy, policies and services.”
Letter from Karen Dunnell, National Statistician in May 2006 to four government departments.

Statistics Commission say: “It is clear to us that this is not a problem that can simply be left at the door of the Office for National Statistics… The development of policy on immigration, monitoring the impact of current policies, and the provision of services targeted at immigrant communities may all be adversely affected by weak data.”
Letter from Prof. David Rhind, Chairman, Statistics Commission to four government departments, 8th May 2006

Tony Travers, Director of London Group at the London School of Economics There’s no accounting for some people July 2006 and Migration works November 2006 said: “Town halls are trapped with all the costs but none of the tax benefits [of migration]. We need either vastly better data or – the better option – to allow councils to capture tax derived from local growth.”

Treasury Select Committee July 2007
“It is ironic, and a source of concern, that the ONS can’t produce statistics on its own performance. Both the ONS and HMRC need to start listening to their users and working with them to alleviate the problems – real and perceived – arising from the efficiency programme.”

Public and Commercial Services union general secretary Mark Serwotka said: “One of the central aims of the efficiency
programme was that services wouldn’t suffer, yet day in day out we are seeing backlogs and services damaged.”

Chairman of London Councils Councillor Merrick Cockell, 30/07/07 said:
“The government is still not taking this issue seriously enough. We must get things right before the three year funding settlement kicks in. These inaccurate population counting methods used by the ONS do not reflect the actual patterns of migration in London. The government needs to get them up to scratch quick or London’s councils will be locked into an inadequate finance settlement for the next three years. This would put London’s already stretched council services in danger of being severely overburdened.”

Liam Byrne, Home Office Immigration Minister, publishes a Policy Network pamphlet on migration 18 April 2007:
“The immigration minister [Liam Byrne] says at the very least the Office of National Statistics needs to improve its figures on which key local financing decisions are based, but it also means the tough enforcement of immigration laws, including the prosecution of employers of illegal migrants.”

Guardian 18 April 2007

Mervyn King, Governor of the Bank of England Daily, Telegraph 15 November 2006:
“The Bank is not in the business of doing a cost-benefit analysis of migration – that’s for government. What we’re in the business of doing is in trying to understand the economic consequences of the movements that we see. And I keep stressing that our biggest concern is we simply don’t know how large the migration is.”
“A survey that was designed to learn more about tourism and business travel is not the best source of data from which to learn about migration.”

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Executive summaries from researchers

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An Assessment of Population Data for the City of Westminster

Research by
Local Government Futures Ltd.

July 2007
I. Executive Summary

i. Local Government Futures (LGF) has been commissioned to assess whether the City of Westminster’s particularly diverse population could be accurately measured using the ONS methodologies for calculating population estimates.

ii. This report considers (in Section 1) a brief history of population estimates for the City Council. It highlights the problems associated with the 1991 Census and the uncertainties surrounding the 2001 Census.

iii. We note that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) accepted that the 2001 Census had under-enumerated the resident population within the City of Westminster and, following negotiations, subsequently produced a revised figure (17,500 greater than previously recorded). We also note that this revision was deemed to be the ‘best estimate available’ and officers still believe it to be too low.

iv. We consider the ONS mid-year population estimates (MYE’s) for 2001 to 2005, based on the 2001 Census, and the impact on the City of Westminster arising from the recent ONS changes to its methodology for calculating the 2002 to 2005 MYE’s. We note that, according to these revisions, the City of Westminster, in effect, loses the majority of its population increase following the 2001 Census.

v. In Section 2 of the report, we highlight the main concerns regarding the existing ONS methodology for calculating MYE’s. We note that the ONS, Inter-departmental Migration Task Force and the Audit Commission have all indicated areas where the current methodology is less than robust.

vi. We examine the use of the International Passenger Survey within the current MYE methodology and the incorporation of the Labour Force Survey within the revised MYE methodology. We highlight a number of weaknesses within each of these data-sources, concluding that both methodologies are unlikely to accurately reflect the City of Westminster’s true population numbers.

vii. In Section 3, we examine whether the City of Westminster is an ‘extreme’ local authority and therefore its diverse and mobile population is ultimately impossible to record. We review twelve indicators, identified by ONS, that could be used to suggest uncertainty within the population data. We find that the City of Westminster can be classed an ‘extreme’ local authority for ten of the twelve indicators examined.
Section 4 of the report outlines our overall conclusions. We believe it is worth reproducing them in full, below:

- Our basic analysis indicates that the City of Westminster can be classed as an ‘extreme’ local authority following an examination of twelve indicators associated with uncertainty regarding the ONS population data. More comprehensive research could be undertaken to assess whether the City was unique, with regard to this extremity, amongst all local authorities in England.

- We note that the current ONS methodology, and recently proposed revisions, have real limitations. Both methodologies are unlikely to accurately record the City of Westminster’s population.

- Further, we have established, despite clear evidence suggesting that short-term migrants have an impact on local authority services and expenditure, that ONS do not currently reflect this population group within either the current, or revised, mid-year population methodologies. It is therefore likely that the City of Westminster, with significant levels of short-term migrants within its boundaries, is not well served by the current ONS methodologies and may experience real funding losses as a result.

- We were surprised to find that the City of Westminster had been expressly excluded from the 2007 Census Test because of its extreme characteristics. This exclusion, and the ONS’s statement that “our methods might be sufficiently good enough for more typical cities” suggests that the ONS is seeking to develop a ‘one-size fits all’ methodology with regard to local authority population counts.

- We have found no evidence to suggest that the combination of the City of Westminster’s extreme characteristics have been considered, or addressed, by the current or proposed ONS methodologies for calculating mid year population estimates between 2002 and 2005.

- We do not believe the recent proposals by ONS, to incorporate the use of the Labour Force Survey within their methodology for allocating inward international migration flows amongst local authorities in England, will more accurately reflect the extreme characteristics of the City of Westminster. Consequently, the new ONS proposals will not more accurately reflect the City’s resident population.

- It is clear that, until the City of Westminster’s extreme characteristics are reflected in the ONS methodologies, the mid-year population data produced for the City will always be inaccurate.
• Finally, it is likely that, unless the ONS is able to capture the extreme characteristics of the City of Westminster within their methodology for undertaking the 2011 Census, there will be a further dispute about the robustness of the associated population figures immediately following their publication.
Westminster City Council population research

Behind the numbers
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

August 2007

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Westminster Population Research

Executive Summary

Background

Population statistics and surveys provide a static and generalised picture of the migrant population, whose underlying meaning is difficult to interpret. The central goal of this project was to understand the substance of new migrants’ everyday lives, aspirations, fears and their uses of city spaces and resources. Knowledge of these complex cultural issues is of vital importance to local government in determining the proper strategies and policies to deal with such inherently mobile populations. In this context Westminster City Council has identified the need to understand more about the behaviours of migrants moving into, and out of the borough, and how migrant cultures and behaviours might impact upon the way in which migrant populations appear in statistical reports or traditional surveys.

Research

Research for this project was carried out with four migrant groups broadly categorised as: Chinese, Australian, Arab and Polish. The research was carried out using mainly ethnographic and other qualitative methods, and over a relatively short time-frame. Field research was largely focused on, but not confined to, Westminster.

Behind the findings summarised here, the full report presents some rich and detailed insights. This is partly a result of the in-depth, qualitative and ethnographic methods used in the research. The full report should provide a valuable resource to those wishing to gain a greater understanding of the issues which lie behind the main findings.

Results

1 Visibility and invisibility in migrant populations

The research uncovered a number of factors which may affect the ways in which migrants living and working in Westminster get covered in statistical and other formal attempts to capture their existence and whereabouts. Many of these factors were common across the different groups selected for study, though some are more salient with one group than another. It would also be true to say that many of the findings may apply to other migrant groups and London boroughs, though some are clearly specific to Westminster. Main findings are presented below.

• **Language** Language barriers prevent people from filling in forms, paying bills and completing registrations directly. Although most respondents were paying bills and taxes, often they were paying cash to another person who took care of the formal administration.

• **Accommodation-sharing** Multiple-occupancy houses and flats are common. Even within single rooms there may be many people sharing a small space. This is most often a way of reducing the personal burden of high Westminster rental costs.
• **Mid-term stays in Westminster** Many migrants arrive in Westminster and begin their lives in the UK there. Initial stays in flat-shares, house-shares etc. often last between 3 and 12 months. These periods are used to find jobs, familiarise with the city and take care of any administration.

• **‘Speculative migration’** This is a term researchers came to use, to describe a pattern of migration in which migrants came to Westminster on ‘holiday’ or for a ‘visit’ but actually used the time to ascertain opportunities for jobs and more permanent stays. They behaved more like residents despite sometimes staying for only a few months if no opportunities were found.

• **Status** Some migrants fear being identified by authorities, for many different reasons. These migrants often gravitate towards and share spaces with other migrants of a similar cultural background.

• **Visibility in social and economic life** Migrants play an active and highly visible role in the service industry, rental markets, as consumers and in nightlife, for example. Their potential to be statistically invisible does not mean that they are completely invisible.

The above factors often derive from different motivations and aspirations depending on the migrant group. New migrants, for example, have relative freedom to come and go between Poland and London. Australians often use Westminster as a base for further European travels. Chinese migrants use existing connections and employers to find cheap accommodation and Arabs look to stay near centres of Arabic culture. All of these behaviours and motivations, however, commonly result in the residence patterns outlined here.

2 **Why Westminster?**

There are many reasons why Westminster is a particularly attractive destination point for migrants, including

• **Practical** Migrants physically arrive on coaches and trains in Westminster. For many, the scale of London is unimaginable and so they look for places to stay and work in the vicinity of the place where they arrive.

• **Historical** Previous generations have settled or stayed in Westminster.

• **Economic** An abundance of service industry jobs and a pool of employers sympathetic to and/or aware of migrant labour markets encourage migrants to seek employment in Westminster. It is also important to note the physical and economic links between migrant employment and accommodation. Many migrants stay in dwellings belonging to or in some way connected to employers. Working in Westminster also gives people a desire to live nearby (especially given London travel costs).

• **Cultural** Westminster is the centre of London, which makes it as attractive a place for migrants wanting to experience London life as it does for residents coming in to enjoy its services. Westminster is also home to cultural and community centres such as Chinatown and the Edgware Road.

• **Multi-cultural** Westminster is filled with people from all over the world and therefore seen as congenial to migrants who may be nervous of fitting in elsewhere.

• **Safety** Westminster is seen as safe, not just from crime, but also from the unfamiliarity of unknown London suburbs.
3 A picture of migrant life

Migrant life in Westminster is characterised by diversity, vibrancy, activity and hardship. Experiences range from desperate and unsuccessful attempts to find work or the pain of divided families to economic success and active involvement in London’s cultural and economic life. The research reveals that the lives of recent migrants are dynamic, fluid and industrious. Most migrants, whatever their formal status, are aiming to better their lives and take advantage of the economic and cultural opportunities in Westminster, London and the UK, and are often resourceful and creative in dealing with the hardships, obstacles and openings they find.
Summary of key findings

- **The 2001 Census underestimated the size of Westminster’s population.** A revised 2001 Mid Year Estimate population figure was produced. It is likely that the revised figure underestimates the true population. And a local authority’s ‘base population’ affects the share of migrants it is allocated in future estimates of population – a lower base population results in a lower allocation.

- **Total International Migration (TIM) estimates are based on the United Nations (UN) definition of a long-term international migrant and hence do not take short-term migrants (3-11 months) into account.** This group forms a significant part of Westminster’s population, as the Borough provides a starting-off point for in-migrants.

- **The relevant sample size of in-migrants from the International Passenger Survey (IPS) is extremely small (0.6% of total in-migration).** This sample size is unlikely to produce robust or accurate final estimates, in particular within local authority areas that have a high propensity to attract migrants.

- **The Office for National Statistics’ rationale for using the Labour Force Survey in the formulation of TIM estimates is not robust, as the relevant Labour Force Survey migration sample sizes are actually smaller than those of the International Passenger Surveys.**

- **The New Migration Geographies for In-migration (NMGi) are inappropriate for Westminster, as the Borough received a substantially larger adjustment to its population estimate (as a result of significant international in-migration) than the remainder of the local authorities in the relevant NMGi, and given the way the figures are to be distributed under the new system there is likely to be a concomitant reduction in the figures allocated to Westminster and a proportionate increase in the figures for the other Boroughs. These adjustments are based on changes to the way the statistics are calculated, not on evidence of experience on the ground.**

- **Analysis of the alternative data sources has shown that each data source needs to be handled with caution,** as the individual datasets are constructed on the basis of varying assumptions and definitions and therefore record different components of in-migration. Therefore no one source provides a complete estimate of all in-migrants. For example, estimates of the stock of population vary from the ONS’s current Mid Year Estimate for the period (2001-2005) of 228,900 (which is 15,500 below its estimate using the original methodology) to Westminster’s own estimate of 246,453 using housing and electoral roll data and an assumed household size of 2.08. In light of these differences, we strongly recommend the standardisation of both definitions and collation methodologies between data sources, to
ensure consistency, comparability and ease of aggregation (i.e. the avoidance of double counting).

• The review of the limited literature and media coverage on illegal immigration found very limited evidence on its likely level in Westminster, but what evidence there is points to a stock of around 13,000 people, who are unlikely to be counted in permanent population figures.

• The findings from consultations with a small number of voluntary groups and employment agencies dealing with overseas migrants, support the findings of the desk based review – in particular, the barriers faced by migrants on housing, employment and language mean they often take some considerable time to register in official data, which means at any given time official data under estimate the true level of in-migration to Westminster.